The Victorian Woman Novelist in an Era of Reform: The Effects of the Position of Women and Serialization on the Novels of Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot

By

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Chapter One: The Gendered Position of the Victorian Woman Novelist

Introduction

The middle of the nineteenth century in Britain saw the advent of a host of social problem novels addressing concerns about class differences and the effects of the Industrial Revolution, ranging from works by Harriet Martineau and Anthony Trollope to Charles Dickens and the soon-to-be prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli. In this thesis I am particularly interested in two social problem novels by prominent women British writers, *North and South* by Elizabeth Gaskell (published in the magazine *Household Words* between 1854 and 1855), and *Middlemarch* by George Eliot (published in part-issues between 1871 and 1872).

In this thesis, I am interested in how the position of women during this period may have played out in the writing of these novels. Mid-nineteenth century Victorian England was a time of significant social change. Industrialization and its aftermath opened doors for a wide variety of men, but doors opened more slowly for women. How did the social conditions of women in this time shape the way that these authors wrote their novels? And how is this revealed through the portrayal of their heroines?

Secondly, this period is unique in its extensive reliance on issuing novels in parts, either through magazines or part-issues. How did these women writers go about publishing novels in a situation where men dominated the publishing world? And how did the technology of the day – in this case the creation of these novels in a serialized
framework which inevitably demanded attention to the feedback from both publisher and public – distinctively affect these women writers?

In posing these questions, it is my contention that Victorian women novelists – perhaps especially novelists of the stature of Gaskell and particularly Eliot – are not likely to be monolithic in their reactions to their social and historical contexts. For that reason, I am as interested in the contrasts between the situations of these two women as I am in their similarities. While both wrote social problem novels, Elizabeth Gaskell was near the beginning of her writing career when she wrote *North and South*, so that her interactions with her more famous publisher, Charles Dickens, would be especially worth studying. George Eliot, on the other hand, had a solid reputation by the time she wrote *Middlemarch* and so was likely to be less beholden to male publishers, but was perhaps more aware of the limitations placed on women’s aspirations at this point in her life and her career.

This introductory chapter will include a historiographical review of the nineteenth-century British socioeconomic context, focusing on its effects on women. I will follow this with a more specific historiographical analysis of writings about serialized fiction during this period, with special attention to the gendered effects of serialization on female authors. In both these analyses, I will argue that earlier scholarly work (roughly from 1980 through 2000) clearly identified the opportunities and challenges of the Victorian woman writer. In contrast, later work (from about 2001 on) addressed the ways in which these women actively tried to meet those prospects. One of the goals of this thesis will be to develop yet another theory – in this case a psychological theory – of how these Victorian women writers managed their hopes and possibilities.
Social Conditions of Women in Mid Nineteenth-Century England

The middle of the nineteenth century in Britain saw a wide range of political reforms that granted new opportunities for both men and – to a lesser extent – women. The Representation of the People Act of 1832 (generally known as the First Reform Act) altered districts for the House of Commons to ensure a more equitable representation and increased the (entirely male) electorate by over fifty percent. In 1839, Parliament passed the Custody of Infants Act, which allowed divorced mothers to petition for the custody of young children (prior to this, custody was always given to fathers), and the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 made divorces easier to obtain. The Second Reform Bill passed in 1867 granted the vote to still more male citizens, though this privilege was still based on property requirements. Voting rights for British women were still on the distant horizon (eventually granted in two stages in 1918 and 1928), though John Stuart Mill forcefully argued for female suffrage in his essay “The Subjection of Women,” published in 1869.

In the early nineteenth century, the common law legal doctrine of coverture meant that women were essentially placed under the control of their husbands after marriage, but the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 granted married women the rights to own, control and inherit property.

Essays published by male writers in mid nineteenth-century Britain are generally consistent with this political history of tightly controlled progress in women’s rights. In his 1864 essay “The Education of Women,” J.C. Fitch suggested that educated women might make better wives. However, he goes on to say: “If women asked for a system of mixed education, to the bar, the church, or the legislature, the reply to such demands
would be very simple. We cannot imperil the social order.”¹ Similar thoughts had been put forth in the 1862 essay by W.R. Greg, “Why Are Women Redundant?” which concluded that unmarried working women were unfulfilled and unnatural. These contemporaneous essays imply that middle-class women in the mid-nineteenth century should be kept in their place, though perhaps they might receive a limited education. Yet a modern analysis by literature scholar Mary Poovey claims that the very conditions that upset Greg – that there was a surplus of such unmarried women – created an expanded role for middle-class Victorian women that gradually opened up new opportunities for them.² Karl Ittmann also suggests that the changes in mid-nineteenth century England brought about by the Industrial Revolution led to an increased economic and social role for women.³

At the same time, however, the greater economic uncertainty of this mid-nineteenth century period resulted in smaller families and a greater need for the protection of women. This uneasy balance between the expanded role of women set against the contractions imposed upon them by economic and social forces is further developed by historian Phillipa Levine who notes that male labor unions were reluctant to include women, and that Victorian proto-feminists were conflicted about mixing up

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¹ Jennifer Phegley, Educating the Proper Woman Reader: Victorian Family Literary Magazines and the Cultural Health of the Nation (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2004), 164.


issues about gender with social class – a tension that is apparent in the narrative in *North and South*.4

While the scholarship through the 1990’s talks of opportunities and limitations for women in mid-nineteenth-century England, the nature of how women embraced those various situations is less clear. In the next decade, scholars more clearly articulated one important social role for women of this period: their participation in reform and philanthropic movements, an important element in the lives of the female protagonists of both Gaskell’s and Eliot’s works. The complexities of balancing this philanthropic role with domestic duties – especially in the female characters portrayed in *North and South* and *Middlemarch* – are fully discussed by Sarah Dredge and Dorice Williams Elliott, who note some limited success in these fictional philanthropic endeavors.5,6

Another important role for women in this period is that of a writer. The novel market of Victorian England was dominated by women authors, and yet women had few seats at the literary table.7 Literary scholar Elsie Michie contends that the Victorian woman writer was essentially excluded from serious consideration by publishers by virtue of her femininity.8 Michie spelled these limitations out, but again, more recent

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scholarship has also emphasized how women responded to these challenges. The expanded role for women in both the workforce and reform movements led to some degree of expansion for women writers, too. This expansion is reinforced by Pauline Nestor’s claims that mid-nineteenth-century women created new ways of befriending and connecting with other women.\(^9\) And Kimberly Stern reviewed the actions of women literary critics in Victorian Britain, who discovered ways to engage in critical dialogues with male counterparts.\(^10\) In this thesis I am interested in exploring how Gaskell and Eliot forged relationships with men in the publishing world (Dickens for Gaskell, Lewes for Eliot) as well as with other women to claim a significant literary voice, and I will examine their letters to see how this occurred.

The political backdrop of mid-nineteenth-century England also reflected the tenuous position of the women of this period. While the Reform Act of 1832 partially extended the franchise through its redistricting of boroughs, and the Second Reform Act of 1867 increased that extension to include more male voters – women were not included, even though limited women’s suffrage was expected by some in the second reform. Interestingly, *Middlemarch* is set at the time of the first reform, even though it was written soon after the second reform had taken place. Literary scholar Jonathan Loesberg theorizes that much of the debate during the Second Reform Act was driven by an unspoken concern about class identity – that extending voting rights would erase

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boundaries between classes, leading to anxieties about one’s place in society.\textsuperscript{11} Loesberg connects this to the rise of Sensation Fiction during this time, postulating that such narratives gave voice to these unspoken fears about social class. His argument resonates with Fitch’s concern that “We cannot imperil the social order,” but note Loesberg’s focus on class rather than gender. Formulations by scholars about anxiety over gendered identity – and not just class identity – would be developed some twenty years later by feminist critics, some of whom are discussed in the next section.

**Nineteenth-Century Serialization of Novels and Its Relationship to Women Writers**

The assembly of nineteenth-century novels in modern libraries bears little resemblance to their original forms. What we see now are substantial volumes, but the nineteenth-century reader in Great Britain often read these works sequentially in much smaller pieces. The serialization of the novel came into full force with the publication of Charles Dickens’s first major work, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, presented incrementally through the medium of periodicals during the years 1836 and 1837.\textsuperscript{12} Dickens made full use of serialization, through it claiming remarkable popularity, but he was not alone in this publication method. In their review of serialization, Patricia Okker and Nancy West list numerous other novelists who later used this format – in


Britain these included William Makepeace Thackeray, Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot.\textsuperscript{13}

Laurel Brake argues that there was a reciprocal relationship between books and periodicals during this period – books were expensive, but periodicals were cheaper and more accessible to the increasingly literate populations of Britain.\textsuperscript{14} And through this early form of mass media, reading the novel became a community project, with group readings and frequent discussions about each novel as it progressed piece by piece over time. The degree of communication between authors and their reading public varied significantly – not all were as intensely involved with readers as Charles Dickens, who sometimes changed his plots in response to public demands.\textsuperscript{15} Nonetheless, in all these cases the serialized form inevitably influenced the fiction recounted within, if not directly through reader responses, then by the mediating force of periodical editors sensitive to their publics. Periodicals are by their nature a kind of group enterprise, and apart from their multi-authored nature, Brake notes that anonymous writing during the nineteenth century – especially in magazines – was not uncommon, though Charles Dickens was a curious exception to this rule because he published in his own magazines which carried his name as editor throughout.\textsuperscript{16} In this way the stage was set for a potential reduction in the all-powerful role of the author. Essentially, these arguments all note that serialization


\textsuperscript{15} Jennifer Hayward, \textit{Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fiction from Dickens to Soap Opera} (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997).

\textsuperscript{16} Brake, \textit{Print in Transition}..
has the potential to shift the balance of power, usually away from the author and towards those (publisher, audience) receiving the work. These features may have contained the seeds for a move away from serialized novels by the end of the nineteenth century; as Rachel Ihara notes, some novelists, such as Henry James, complained about the limitations of serialization on individual artistic freedom.¹⁷ And Linda Hughes and Michael Lund make the further point that a shift of scientific emphasis in the early twentieth century (from developmental biology to a model of physics championing simultaneity) may have been related to narratives that became less linear, and so less amenable to serialized disclosure.¹⁸

But more recently literary scholar Mark Turner has suggested that serials are “unruly,” in that the publisher and the author can shift the form and the content to fit the audience.¹⁹ In making this argument, he suggests that the author of the serialized work may have a more active role than earlier critics imply, in that the author can make choices as the work progresses. And another important feature of serialized publication showcased by recent scholars is its sequential nature, with accompanying demands for linear plot development and repetition. In this regard, Elizabeth Womack has introduced the idea that the author of a work of fiction may experience the characters – and the work


itself – as having a kind of life and so also potentially a death. Using the case of the creation of *North and South*, Womack contends that this sense of life-and-death is even more apparent in serialized fiction, which extends the time frame of the work while again, at the same time, the work is less under the control of the author. But in discussing Gaskell, Womack does not just portray her subject as a passive victim of either Dickens or the forces of serialization. Instead, Womack describes with some detail how Gaskell sometimes wished to “kill off” her characters so that she could return to her own life.

Academic exploration of the relationships between serialization and the development of the nineteenth-century novel has been an active field for some time, though much of the early work in this area focused on individual authors, most often male. But more recent scholarship has examined how both serialization and writing itself can serve as a distinctly feminine activity, with an increased focus on gender as an important variable. Pauline Nestor makes the intriguing argument that the middle of the nineteenth century includes the advent of the use of full-length mirrors, as well as photography, allowing women to view themselves in ways previously not available to them. Nestor further argues that letter writing became less expensive, and therefore yet another way in which women could find a voice and express themselves, another reason to explore the letters of Gaskell and Eliot. I would add that the popularization of magazines and serialized publication was another technological factor that affected Victorian authors, and perhaps another mirror in which to view themselves, since their

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work was reflected back to them more immediately through public response and sales figures.

Other recent scholarship has applied a feminist critique to the question of how serialization intersected with the experience of female writers. Martha Vicinus reviews the history of feminist literary criticism and considers the case of Eliot’s heroine Dorothea Brooke as a contrast to the more “feminist” life of Eliot herself – a fact that she ties to Kate Millett’s analysis that because Eliot “lived in sin” with her common-law husband George Henry Lewes, she could not write as fully about liberated women.22 Jennifer Phegley explores the history of the *Victoria Magazine*, and notes how this magazine, created by women and even physically printed by women, empowered women even though its budget was unable to compete with those of better-known serials like the *Cornhill Magazine*.23 *Victoria* championed statements such as “Let women be thoroughly developed…Let women be properly protected by law. Let women have fair chances of a livelihood. And lastly let women have ample access to all stores of learning.”24 And extending the feminist analysis still further, Linda Hughes and Michael Lund (2003) suggest that the process of serialization itself, with its multiple narrative arcs and climaxes, is more akin to female sexuality than the single arc of the one-volume novel.25 These thought-provoking arguments suggest that women writers in the serialized world

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23 Phegley, *Educating the Proper Woman Reader*.


might thrive (since the format may be in concert with their temperament and sexuality),
and that they also might especially thrive actively, and independently of men – though
here is it worth noting that George Eliot, though she complimented the efforts of the
Victoria Magazine, declined to contribute to it.  

These analyses, when taken together, suggest on one hand that female authors
might suffer from the serialized release of their novels (since the format may take away
some of their authorial prerogative) at the same time that they embrace this format for its
potential advantages of an increased audience, particularly with women readers whose
busy lives might gravitate to this method of release. In this thesis, I will try to consider
the ways in which this format may have both limited Gaskell and Eliot (who might be
then more beholden to their male publishers) and granted them more freedom by creating
a bond between author and audience. I will argue that the experiences of Victorian
woman authors are not uniform and encompass a wide range of empowerment through
serialization. In this context, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot were very different
writers, with notably different publishing experiences. I have chosen one example by
each author, which though serialized, were presented through two extremes of this
option: North and South was published in twenty-two parts as part of a weekly magazine,
while Middlemarch was issued in eight free-standing part-issues over a longer time span.
In the next two chapters I will examine closely how this worked for each of these writers,
both in terms of their relationships with their respective publishers, and in the final
product of their novels.

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26 Phegley, Educating the Proper Woman Reader, 159.
Finally, throughout these historiographical analyses, I have noted a shift from earlier scholarship – which seeks to place the Victorian woman (and often the female writer) in a social context that offers her a matrix of limitations and opportunities, to more recent criticism – which credits the Victorian woman with using active strategies to meet those challenges. I would like to go one step further and address the inner psychological strategies of these women, these women authors, and the female protagonists in their novels, who must ultimately come to terms with an imperfect world, in which they can imagine a promised land of more opportunity, but cannot enter into it. They must pay a price for such an experience, which at its worst can lead to despair, but which also might lead to an extra measure of wisdom and self-observation.

I would propose that the serialization process underlines the bittersweet involvement with their writing and the world at large, by demonstrating relationships with publishers and audiences that are based on a tenuous position of power. Women in nineteenth-century England appear to be gaining increased authority, but – as in the disappointments of female suffrage in the Reform Acts – can only look on at a male-dominated world. Finally, I will further show that this bittersweet position is a central defining feature of both heroines in the works here discussed by Gaskell and Eliot.

In the next two chapters, I will more closely examine the contexts in which both these authors were writing. In chapter two, I will investigate the relationship that Elizabeth Gaskell had with her publisher Charles Dickens. Although Gaskell’s papers chiefly reside in Manchester, England, they were available to me through microfilm in Harvard’s Lamont Library. In addition, many of her available letters are published in book form, as are the letters of Charles Dickens. And since back issues of Household
Words have been digitized, I was able to compare how North and South first appeared in that magazine with its later full volume form.

In chapter three, I will attend to the question of how Eliot composed her groundbreaking novel, through looking at George Eliot’s quarry for Middlemarch, which contains her notes for the creation of this work. This original document is available at Harvard’s Houghton Library, which has also made a full digitized copy of this manuscript available online. In addition, Anna Theresa Kitchel has published an edited and transcribed version of this document, and both these sources enabled me to look under the surface of Eliot’s creative process as she created Middlemarch. And Eliot’s letters and diary are available in book form.

Finally, in a concluding chapter I will compare how these two works – though composed in very different fashions through different forms of serialization – have certain commonalities, particularly revealed through the content of the novels and the experiences of the heroines they created.
Chapter Two: *North and South: A Novel of Opposition*

Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*, originally published between 1854 and 1855 in the magazine *Household Words*, is well characterized as a social problem novel, in which characters from the wealthier south of England confront the problems inherent in the industrialized north. Its publication followed on the heels of another novel addressing a similar topic, Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* (also published in *Household Words*), ending one month before the introduction of *North and South*. However, an unsigned review from April 14, 1855 in the *Manchester Weekly Advertiser* found Mrs. Gaskell’s work to be a better representative of Manchester life:

In our district, where the scene is chiefly laid, it has a special title to be widely read, and the publication of “North and South” in *Household Words* may retrieve for the latter some of that unjust and untrue caricature of manufacturing life and character, Mr. Dickens’s “Hard Times.”

27 Similarly, Annette Hopkins has called *North and South* “probably the best industrial novel” of mid-nineteenth-century Britain. Yet Gaskell herself might have added a postscript to these reviews; she found the writing of this work, shoehorned as it was into the format required by a weekly magazine, both torturous and ultimately somewhat unsatisfactory. In this chapter, my primary focus will be the history of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* as it appeared during the years 1854-1855 in *Household Words*, a periodical edited by Charles Dickens. Their respective positions, she as a relatively new novel writer unused to the pace of journal submissions, and he as an editor


anxious to both control the format and sell copies of his journal, led to a long series of communications. I am especially interested in this (often uneasy) interaction between Gaskell and Dickens, as it relates to her reaction to her audience, the serialization format, and the articulation of her social message about the brutality of the Industrial Revolution.

*North and South* presents a carefully chosen cast of characters who represent – and often speak for – three distinct social classes that shaped nineteenth-century Britain: the professional or independently wealthy older middle classes of the south of England, the newer industrial middle class of factory owners, managers, and local investors who dominated the nation’s midlands to the north, and the working poor who labored in the new textile factories of Manchester and other rapidly growing cities. The plot of the novel brings the three classes into close contact, and involves a female protagonist, Margaret Hale, who moves with her family from the rural south of England to the urban industrialized north. There she encounters the social ills suffered by the striking workers, as she also meets the mill manager, John Thornton, whom her father tutors. After saving him from a rock thrown by a worker, Margaret refuses a marriage proposal from Thornton, but later events – including one in which he saves her from a perjury charge as she tries to protect her rebellious brother – lead to a change of heart. In the end, Margaret inherits a fortune from a friend of her father’s, through which she is able to save John Thornton from financial ruin.

This is a complex plot which involves much back and forth in terms of the relative power enjoyed by these two main characters, but it is worth noting that Gaskell ends the novel by enriching her female protagonist so that she can potentially become independent, and then quickly unites her with a weakened but still powerful man through
It could be argued that this resolution suggests a certain ambivalence on Gaskell’s part towards men regarding issues of power and control, and that this ambivalence can also be seen in the interchange of letters between this author and her editor, Charles Dickens.

In this chapter I will first briefly review Gaskell’s history as a writer of fiction, with special attention to the publication forms she used with such works, including her use of serialization. I will then turn to the writing and publication of *North and South* in *Household Words*, revealed through letters between Gaskell and Dickens as well as letters between Gaskell and female confidants. Next, I will compare the serialized version of this novel to the expanded version appearing in the subsequent volume edition. Finally, I will note how features of the novel, particularly in its female protagonist, reflect and are consonant with the struggles encountered by Gaskell in the writing of this novel.

**Elizabeth Gaskell and her Publication History**

Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell (née Stevenson) was born in London in 1810. At the age of 13 months, she lost her mother and was subsequently raised by her maternal aunt and sent to boarding school. Her father died in 1829, and within three years she met and married William Gaskell, a Unitarian minister in Manchester, where Gaskell lived for the rest of her life. Much of her life was devoted to charity work and the raising of four daughters, though it should be noted that she also lost three other children (including two sons) in infancy. Her husband encouraged her to write partly as a way of coping with these tragic losses.²⁹

²⁹ Gaskell, *North and South: An Authoritative Text.*
Gaskell’s first stories were published in 1847. A year later, she brought out her first novel – anonymously at first – *Mary Barton*. The social problems of industrialization highlighted in this novel attracted the attention of Charles Dickens, whom Gaskell first met in 1849. They entered into a correspondence, quite positive at first though later more contentious, and within a year, she began publishing in *Household Words*, a weekly magazine edited by Dickens whose inexpensive price targeted the working class (though in fact its readership probably consisted primarily of the middle class). While Dickens claims in January 31, 1850 that “I do honestly know that there is no living English writer whose aid I would desire to enlist in preference to the authoress of Mary Barton (a book that most profoundly affected and impressed me),” ³⁰ he is quick to assume an advisory and at times a somewhat controlling role in shaping her stories. For example, on February 5 of that year, Dickens asks for a change in the ending of “Lizzie Leigh,” in which Lizzie hands her illegitimate daughter over to another woman rather than abandoning her completely, a change to which Gaskell agreed. ³¹ In “The Heart of John Middleton,” he notes in a letter on December 17, 1850 “that I wished that you had not killed the wife,” though it was too late to make any such change. ³² In a still subsequent piece, “The Old Nurse’s Story,” Dickens argues in a series of letters in November and December of 1852

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³¹ Dickens, *The Letters of Charles Dickens, vol. 6*.

³² Charles Dickens, *The Letters of Charles Dickens, vol. 6*. 
that it would be best if all the characters in this ghost story could see the apparition, rather than just a single child, but here Gaskell refused to follow his suggestion.  

Apart from these examples of attempted control by Dickens, there is also the important issue of authority. As was the custom of the day, contributions to *Household Words* were published without a name, though sometimes there would be an allusion to the identity of the author of a story by referring to an earlier work by that person. When Gaskell then wrote the short novel *Cranford* for publication in the magazine, she mentioned that one of her characters had a copy of *Pickwick* in his hands, but Dickens insisted this be changed, stating on December 5, 1851: “Any recollection of me from your pen cannot (as I think you know) be otherwise than truly gratifying to me; but with my name on every page of *Household Words*, there would be – or at least I should feel – an impropriety in so mentioning myself.” Gaskell was unhappy about this proposed change, since the reference was critical to her plot, but Dickens prevailed. But it is worth noting here that while Gaskell (and other contributors to *Household Words*) were to remain anonymous, Dickens was well aware that his own name would be front and center throughout his journal.

These relatively small conflicts would be magnified when Gaskell wrote *North and South* for *Household Words* in 1854-1855. After that time, Gaskell continued to provide stories – but no additional novel (despite Dickens’s request for this) – for *Household Words* and for Dickens’s subsequent and similar weekly magazine *All the

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Year Round. In 1857, Gaskell wrote *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, followed in 1863 by *Sylvia’s Lovers*, both in volume form. Gaskell would end her career with more serialized works, this time published in the more prestigious and higher-paying monthly *Cornhill Magazine*, edited by William Makepeace Thackeray that would feature works by Joseph Conrad, Thomas Hardy and George Eliot. In this periodical, which had a significantly wider circulation, Gaskell published *Cousin Phillis* (in 1863) and her final work, *Wives and Daughters* (initiated in 1864). 35

The Creation of *North and South* for *Household Words*

In Chapter 25 of *North and South*, Elizabeth Gaskell writes of the relationship between her female protagonist and the mill owner whom she would eventually marry: “Their intercourse had been one continued series of oppositions.” 36 While this does indeed characterize the complex bond between Margaret Hale and Mr. Thornton, it appears to be equally true of the dynamics between Gaskell and her publisher during the writing of *North and South*. Letters from Dickens to Gaskell during this period seem to alternate between positions in which he offers his author relative freedom and those in which he claims significant control. Just prior to this work on September 19, 1853, he says about a Christmas piece she is writing for him: “No. I won’t give any outline. Because anything that you like to write in the way of story-telling, when you come out of


that tea-leaf condition will please me.”37 Less than a year later, on June 7, 1854, he reveals his thoughts about the new manuscript that is to become North and South: “It opens an admirable story, is full of character and power, has a strong suspended interest in it…and has the very best marks of your hand in it.”38

However, he then proceeds in much detail (even considering his role as editor), over the next two pages to outline specifically how the story must be divided for his magazine “based on my long comparison of the advantages and disadvantages of the periodical form of appearance.” Dickens follows this about a month later on July 26 with more suggestions about parts, a request to be more concise, and a helpful suggestion for the book’s name: “North and South appears to me to be a better name than Margaret Hale. It implies more, and is expressive of the opposite people brought face to face by the story.”39 Within another month, on August 20, he takes charge still further: “This is the place where we agreed that there should be a great condensation, and a considerable compression.”40

Gaskell, for her part, shows some resistance to this control, though somewhat passively. By December 17, 1854, she writes Dickens: “I have tried to shorten it and compress it…and what I want to tell you now is this – Mr. Gaskell has looked this piece well over, so I don’t think there will be any carelessnesses in it…therefore I never wish to see it’s [sic] face again; but, if you will keep the MS for me, and shorten as you think best

39 Charles Dickens, The Letters of Charles Dickens, vol. 7
for HW.” Gaskell goes on to proclaim: “I think a better title than N. and S. would have been ‘Death & Variations.’ There are 5 deaths, each beautifully suited to the character of the individual.”¹⁴¹ Unsurprisingly, by the time he congratulates her for completing the book on January 27 of 1855, Dickens is aware of Gaskell’s discomfort with his commands: “You will not, I hope, allow that non-lucid interval of dissatisfaction with yourself (and me?) which beset you for a minute or two once upon a time, to linger in the shape of any disagreeable association with Household Words.”¹⁴² Despite Dickens’s polite exterior here, however, he is more direct (and severe) in his private criticism of Gaskell in letters of this time directed to his agent William Henry Wills.¹⁴³ And Gaskell’s words suggest that she is not unaware of his underlying disparagement, though she remains somewhat deferential in spite of this, a behavior perhaps partly determined because of her position as a woman in a male-controlled publishing environment. Support for this last position includes the act of bringing her husband in to act as a mediator, and her subsequent letter to another woman writer Anna Jameson, to whom she complains more openly.

Analysis of this back-and-forth between Gaskell and Dickens has been addressed by several critics, most thoroughly by Annette Hopkins and later by Dorothy Collin. As Hopkins states, “The ultimate source of the trouble was that the novel, by its very nature, was unsuitable for serialization on the Dickens pattern…A book in which a great deal of the drama goes on in the minds of the characters does not lend itself to mechanical

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divisions ending, with every issue, on a strongly emotional note.”

Collin also addresses the problem from Dickens’s perspective: “Dickens presumably intended that the two novels, *Hard Times* and *North and South*, should serve similar purposes as *Household Words* serials, and should be comparable in length.” But both Dickens and his printers miscalculated how Gaskell’s early manuscript would translate into printed columns, and the result was that even with Dickens’s attempts to cut it down, it still came in at a column length almost a third again as long as *Hard Times*. As Collin notes: “As editor, Dickens was concerned with the effect of the lengthy parts on the magazine as a whole,” and indeed sales of *Household Words* did go down during the end of 1854, a fact that Dickens was quick to blame on Gaskell in private correspondence with William Henry Wills.

Why then did Dickens and Gaskell enter into such an arrangement for the publication of *North and South*? Dickens was clearly interested in addressing social issues in his magazine and thought that Gaskell’s writing would fit his mission. Gaskell showed some hesitancy in proceeding with this plan, especially before the manuscript was completed, but was encouraged on by Dickens. But it is important also to note here that Gaskell was at this time a relatively new author, and she likely thought that her work would reach a larger audience through serialized publication in a weekly magazine.

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46 Collin, “The Composition of Mrs. Gaskell’s *North and South*,” 79.
Collin notes that Charlotte Brontë provided evidence for this speculation in a letter to Gaskell on 30 September 1854:

Do not suffer yourself to be either vexed or in low spirits about what you have ‘gone and done.’ We all know that it is not precisely advantageous to a really good book to be published piecemeal in a periodical – but still – such a plan has its good side. ‘North and South’ will thus be seen by many into whose hands it would not otherwise fall.\textsuperscript{47}

\textit{North and South} in a volume format

\textit{North and South} had a second life in volume form shortly after its completion in \textit{Household Words}. As Dorothy Collin notes in some detail, the ending was expanded as Gaskell felt freed of the restraints of Dickens and his editing. This time she consults in January of 1855 with the writer Anna Jameson for advice about reworking her manuscript: “Every page was grudged me, just at last when I did certainly infringe all the bounds & limits they set me as to quantity. Just at the very last I was compelled to desperate compression…But, it is being republished as a whole, in two vols; – and the question is shall I alter and enlarge what is already written?...Would you give me your very valuable opinion as to this?”\textsuperscript{48} She receives a quick answer, to which she then writes back on January 30:

No! indeed, you have not been a bit too abrupt. I wanted just what you tell me, - even more decidedly if need were; & truth is too precious & valuable a thing to need drapery, - you tell me just what I wanted to know. If the story had been poured just warm out of the mind, it would have taken a much larger mould. It was the cruel necessity of compressing it that hampered me. And now I can’t do much; I may not even succeed when I try, but I will try for my own satisfaction even if it does not answer.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{47} Collin, “The Composition of Mrs. Gaskell’s \textit{North and South},” 84.

\textsuperscript{48} Gaskell, \textit{The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell}, 329.

\textsuperscript{49} Gaskell, \textit{The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell}, 330-331.
It is important to see here how different in tone this interchange with this woman writer is in comparison to Gaskell’s notes to Dickens. Here there is an implication of mutual respect, and an openness to change that was less apparent in her dialogues with her editor. Here too it is worth noting that Gaskell engaged in extensive entertaining in Manchester, where she attempted to create an environment where other women writers could congregate. Gaskell was not in any sense isolated from other notable women; she was also close friends with Charlotte Brontë and wrote much of *North and South* at the home of Florence Nightingale.

Gaskell proceeded with revisions to the volume edition. A close comparison between the novel as it appeared in *Household Words* and the later volume edition indicates that she made few changes to the first ninety percent of the novel. However, the ending was a different matter. Gaskell had felt that this was unduly compressed, and she expanded it significantly by about 35 printed pages, transforming chapter 44 into five chapters. In these additions, Gaskell paid more attention to both John Thornton’s and (especially) Margaret Hale’s thoughts and feelings as they experienced growing stress in their relationships with each other and with their family members and friends. As Margaret’s parents and several close friends died in the novel’s second half, she was repeatedly forced to confront her isolation and develop independence. In the serialized version, the death of Margaret’s benefactor, Mr. Bell, was passed by in an instant (although his financial legacy to her was more fully explored); the volume novel enlarged both Margaret’s interaction with this character as well as the occurrence of his death.

Gaskell also further explored the meaning of the critical visit of her brother Frederick to the family, an area that needed more attention since this shaped Mr.
Thornton’s feelings towards Margaret. And Margaret’s crucial inner meditation about what her life in the northern city of Milton had meant to her, and what she must consequently do was more fully developed. All these alterations served to make both Margaret and Mr. Thornton’s last-minute reconciliation, as well as Margaret’s character and actions, more easily understood.

Gaskell saw these changes as an improvement, and in the end rather regretted originally publishing her complex novel in a weekly serialized format. The rapid pace of weekly publication did not allow for one supposed advantage of serialization, the opportunity to respond to feedback from readers and critics to further develop plot and characters. Her next two works were published first in volumes, and when she finally returned to writing a novel in serialized fashion, it was not under the editorial oversight of Dickens, but rather in the more prestigious (and monthly) *Cornhill Magazine*, a publication that allowed for longer segments with fewer parts and awkward breaks.

**Elizabeth Gaskell and Margaret Hale in Historical Context**

While the focus of this chapter has been on Gaskell’s complex relationship with her male editor, it is also worth examining how (and whether) such a gendered conflict may have made its way into the novel itself. Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell was by all accounts a diligent mother, devoted wife of a minister, and energetic in charity work. With such a wide range of demanding activities, one might ask how she came to write for publication at all. And indeed, she left relatively little in the way of her own reflections on the matter. A diary she wrote was largely addressed to her oldest daughter, since
Gaskell half-expected that she might follow her own mother to an early death. Yet Gaskell demonstrates awareness of the life of a woman author through her writing about her friend Charlotte Brontë after the publication of *Jane Eyre*:

Charlotte Brontë’s existence became divided into two parallel currents – her life as Currer Bell, the author; her life as Charlotte Brontë, the woman. There were separate duties belonging to each other; not impossible, but difficult to be reconciled. When a man becomes an author, it is probably merely a change of employment to him…a woman’s principal work in life is hardly left to her own choice; nor can she drop the domestic charges devolving on her as an individual, for the exercise of the most splendid talents that were ever bestowed.

Through this analysis, Gaskell clearly appreciates the limitations particular to a woman writer during this time, especially in balancing numerous competing duties. Yet her interactions with Dickens shed light on yet another limitation: with few notable exceptions, such as the *Victoria Magazine*, women were much less likely to serve as gatekeepers in the publishing world. Gaskell was beholden to Dickens, though her power presumably increased (somewhat) as her reputation grew.

How do these limitations of power and authority translate into Gaskell’s main female protagonist in *North and South*? Though much of the action of *North and South* consists of thoughts and ideas, Margaret Hale is neither inactive (she travels back and forth between the south and the north, and those travels inform her experience) nor passive (she acts decisively to save her brother Frederick and also places her body between an angry mob and Mr. Thornton). Still, Margaret may be best described as a

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mediator, constantly facilitating understanding between the various social groups in the novel. Gaskell was aware of this mediating function when she chose to preface her first chapter of *North and South* in *Household Words* with a poem (“The Cock”) by Tennyson (though remarkably, Tennyson’s poem seems to have disappeared in the later volume edition):

Ah, yet, though all the world forsake,  
Though fortune clip my wings,  
I will not cramp my heart, nor take  
Half-views of men and things.  
Let Whig and Tory stir their blood;  
There must be stormy weather;  
But for some true result of good  
All parties work together.52

Considering the social context for women (and women writers) in this Victorian era, it might be worth noticing the second line of Tennyson’s poem: “Though fortune clip my wings.” For Margaret, despite a large inheritance, is somewhat dependent on an alliance with a man to make good use of it. At the end of *North and South*, Elizabeth Womack notes that Margaret “looks forward to the day when she will have leisure to look back on her life and ‘see the life that might have been’ if she had different choices.”53 While Elizabeth Womack argues that this is evidence of a morbid preoccupation (certainly a possibility given the many losses in Gaskell’s life), I would also assert that this reveals the bittersweet reflection that is the lot – but perhaps also the strength – of women during this period. For in this novel, Margaret is well-respected for her wisdom, but ultimately limited in her effectiveness absent a male companion. In the

52 Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell, “North and South,” chapters 1 & 2, *Household Words* 10 (September 2, 1854): 61-68.

following chapter, I will compare her situation to that of George Eliot’s heroine, 
Dorothea Brooke.
Chapter Three: *Middlemarch*: Form and Fiction

George Eliot’s novel *Middlemarch* was described by Virginia Wolf as “One of the few English novels written for grown-up people.”\(^5^4\) It is indeed an intellectually challenging work, marked by numerous classical references. It also has a high degree of complexity, especially through its interwoven plot lines of numerous characters, most of whom reside in Eliot’s fictional Midlands town of Middlemarch. My goal for this chapter is to carefully examine how this literary complexity interacted with – and was in fact fostered by – the published physical form(s) that this novel took, in essence to understand how *form* in this case determined *fiction*. And I am interested in her commerce with readers and editors and consultants (including her common-law husband George Henry Lewes), as well as her presentation of women’s roles in the political reform movement of 1832 that occurs in the novel.

Literary scholar Jerome Beaty, in his important work of 1960 entitled *Middlemarch: from Notebook to Novel*, notes that Eliot began two separate novels that she eventually fused into one.\(^5^5\) It is a lengthy work with multiple subplots, but the two major storylines involve the lives of Dorothea Brooke and Tertius Lydgate. Dorothea is a young principled though naive woman whose idealism leads her to an unhappy marriage with the elderly Reverend Edward Casaubon, who has embarked on a futile quest to write the key to all mythologies. Upon his death, Dorothea decides to forgo the fortune that he conditionally left her (stipulating that she would not marry his disinherited nephew Will

\(^{54}\) *Times Literary Supplement* (20 November 1919): 657-658.

Ladislaw), and proceeds to marry Will. Lydgate is a young physician with sophisticated research ideas and an idealistic temperament that are thwarted by the extravagant spending habits of his wife, Rosamond Vincy. But there are many more characters in this complex novel, several of whom demonstrate limited freedoms determined by their social positions and the society in which they live.

As she wrote *Middlemarch*, Eliot and her common-law husband George Henry Lewes realized that its length would not easily fit into either the usual serial form nested within a magazine or the typical three-volume set used for many (but not all) novels of the time. Lewes conceived of a relatively new form that would involve eight half-volumes that would be issued in bimonthly installments, eventually leading to the publication of a four-volume set. But in order to hold the interest of her readers (who were more interested in the storyline of her heroine Dorothea than in those of other major characters), Eliot was compelled to switch back and forth between different plots and characters as she wrote the novel. I would contend that it is this rich interactive texture that provides much of the force to this novel, and that creates an almost Darwinian environment closely linked to the fate of its characters.

My argument in this chapter will proceed as follows. First, I will briefly review Eliot’s history as a writer of fiction, with particular attention to the publication forms she used in her work, including her use of serialization. I will then focus on the writing and publication of *Middlemarch*, noting how the physical forms of the manuscript (including paper types) contribute to an understanding of the ultimate fiction of *Middlemarch*, a topic on which Eliot herself was generally silent. Next, I will explore how the serial publication of what were essentially eight small books issued in installments affected the
content of the novel, particularly in the sequence of its plot lines. Here I will also
compare this method to the serial publications of other contemporary authors including
Dickens. I will examine how the initial publication of eight half-volumes contrasted with
the ultimate publication of the novel in four volumes sold as a complete set, and
eventually as a single volume work. Throughout this chapter, but especially at its
conclusion, I will note how the complexity of *Middlemarch* is related to the remarkable
story of its publication. Finally, I will reflect on the character of its main female
protagonist, Dorothea, as a representative of the author and the historical context in
which she existed. Like Margaret Hale of *North and South*, Dorothea Brooke was
regarded within the novel (especially by Lydgate) as a woman of great wisdom, despite
the limitations imposed on her in property and power.

**George Eliot and her Publication History**

George Eliot (née Mary Anne Evans) was born in 1819 to a middle-class rural
family. Her father, an estate manager, regarded her as homely, and therefore not likely to
be married, but he also recognized her high intelligence, so he sent her to school.
However, Eliot’s education ended abruptly at the age of sixteen when her mother died,
and she was needed at home to run the household. While at home she developed
connections with local intellectuals and remained there until her father died when she was
thirty. At that point, Eliot left home, moved to London, and embarked upon a successful
career as a translator and literary editor.

During this time, George Eliot formed intimate bonds with two men. The first was
the philosopher and biologist Herbert Spencer. The second was George Henry Lewes, a
married man, permanently separated from his wife, with whom Eliot decided to live beginning in 1854, forming a common-law partnership that lasted until his death in 1878. Lewes was a philosopher with a strong scientific bent, and when Eliot turned to writing novels, Lewes became her business partner, with a strong role in decisions about publication strategies for her work. However, it is worth noting that Eliot’s letters reveal that she also had female friends to whom she could turn, and, like Gaskell in Manchester, she created a space in London for lively intellectual interchange.56

As extensively documented by Carol Martin in *George Eliot’s Serial Fiction*, George Eliot began her fiction writing career by submitting her first work, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, to *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* in 1857. The installments were then published as one novel — which was in effect three novellas in a common setting in the English Midlands. This work was a modest success, both in serialized form and as a stand-alone novel, and both the work and its author impressed John Blackwood, the senior partner of the publishing firm William Blackwood and Sons, which owned the magazine. Over the next two decades, Blackwood would publish all but one of Eliot’s major novels, and would serialize her last two long and celebrated works, *Middlemarch* (1872) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876), in several parts, but not in his magazine, before issuing them in full volumes. He had hoped to serialize more of her fiction, but he failed to reach agreements with her to place three other popular novels, *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), and *Silas Marner* (1861), in his magazine, although he published all in volume form. Another major work, Eliot’s *Romola* (1862-63), first

appeared in *Cornhill Magazine* before being published in volume form by Smith, Elder and Company in 1863.\(^57\)

In monetary terms, serialization in literary magazines owned by major publishers had attractions for both authors and publishers. The sales of leading periodicals were often fairly large – *Blackwood’s* regularly sold over 8,000 copies – which provided substantial upfront payments to authors and circulation revenue to publishers, while building up a readership for the bound volumes to follow. But the venture could be risky. Many new works of fiction did not sell well in periodical form, and often sold no better as volumes. Publishers, too, faced the risk of a disappointing serialization, and a subsequent disappointing sale of final volumes, often put forth by the same publication house.

Time pressure was an even greater problem. Publishers needed to be able to plan ahead in order to be able to begin the serialization of a new work of fiction in an issue of their magazine that would follow directly on the last issue to finish up another work by another author. For authors, time pressure was probably greater. Even writers who were more self-confident than Eliot found the most common agreements, to begin monthly or even weekly serialization of their work long before they had finished their whole text, to be a challenge. Eliot, who recorded suffering recurrent illness, depression, and general anxiety in her journal and letters, even while writing her strongest work, could not bring herself to serialize the three novels that followed *Scenes of Clerical Life* – *Adam Bede*, *Mill on the Floss*, and *Silas Marner*. And only the payment of an unusually large advance from the ambitious publisher George Smith persuaded her to launch her novel *Romola* in

\(^{57}\) Carol Martin, *George Eliot’s Serial Fiction* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1994).
his new magazine. Even then, she found it so difficult to face the deadline for the first issue before having written more than a small portion of the whole work, that she negotiated a substantial delay in beginning publication, in return for a substantial reduction in her advance. This delay allowed her to proceed, and to finish her novel.58

Yet when George Eliot came to write her longest – and widely considered her finest – novel in 1872-73, she agreed to return to her old publisher, John Blackwood. This time, however, she published her text in eight parts, at two-month intervals, in wrappers, with advertisements at the beginning and end, but not in his magazine. The reasons for her return to Blackwood were probably at least partly personal. While the two had had some major disagreements, they generally liked and respected each other. And Blackwood had wisely made no objection when Eliot accepted George Smith as her publisher to bring out Romola. He candidly admitted that he understood the attraction of Smith’s large advance. When Eliot was ready, some years later, to begin another major work, she still respected Blackwood’s judgment, and he was eager to resume the role of her publisher.59

The Creation of Middlemarch

The process of writing Middlemarch, however, or even of thinking about writing it, was not a simple one. By 1870 George Eliot was regarded by many English readers and critics as her country’s greatest living novelist. But her most recent major novel Romola, which broke new ground for Eliot in its setting – Florence – and time period –

58 Martin, George Eliot’s Serial Fiction.

59 Martin, George Eliot’s Serial Fiction.
the late fifteenth century, had disappointed many of her readers who expected and hoped for another portrayal of English country life, especially in the rural Midlands, the region of her birth, her youth, and nearly all her novels. And Eliot had such a novel in mind, or more accurately, as the scholar Jerome Beaty has shown, two such novels.

Eliot apparently started first on a novel centered on middle-class life in a small Midlands town she called Middlemarch. But she soon took up a quite different story that explored the outer and inner life of an upper-class young woman of the neighboring country gentry, Miss Dorothea Brooke, and her family and close friends. These two circles lived quite separate lives, just as they would have in England in 1829-33, the years in which the final novel, *Middlemarch*, is precisely set. When Eliot finally decided to combine the two stories in one novel, she resolved to keep her two sets of characters quite separate. After her common-law husband George Henry Lewes persuaded John Blackwood to publish *Middlemarch* bimonthly in eight distinct parts, or half volumes, Eliot planned to devote Part I, nearly one hundred pages in length, entirely to Dorothea, ending with her marriage to the elderly Edward Casaubon. Then she would devote all of Part II to the people of Middlemarch and return to Dorothea for all of Part III.

This plan soon fell apart, to the great benefit of Eliot’s novel. John Blackwood, upon reading Part I, objected that she should not delay until Part II the appearance of a single urban middle-class character from Middlemarch. Eliot accommodated, and introduced a few members of the Vincy family at the end of Part I. But when that half volume appeared, the public was so taken with Dorothea Brooke that Eliot decided she could not put off the return of her heroine to Part III. So, Part II began with several chapters devoted to the people of Middlemarch, but then recounted Dorothea’s wedding
journey to Rome with Casaubon, where she meets Will Ladislaw, the man she will eventually marry at the novel’s end. From this point on, the lives of several of Dorothea’s country gentry, and especially of Dorothea herself, are gradually brought into contact with various Middlemarch characters, so that by Parts VI through VIII, Eliot’s large cast of characters, of various social backgrounds, are functioning as a still highly articulated, but effectively interacting society.60

A careful examination of Eliot’s quarry of notes for *Middlemarch* is useful in this regard, since the original sequences of the quarry are often changed in the final production, as noted by Anna Theresa Kitchel in her transcription of the quarry.61 In addition, letters between Eliot and Blackwood, and between George Henry Lewes and Blackwood, shed further light on some of these changes, often driven by the public’s reception – or perceived perception – of the work, though Eliot complains in a letter to Blackwood on October 29, 1871: “But can anything be more uncertain than the reception of a book by the public?”62

Interestingly, Beaty’s conclusions about these two independent stories is largely built on his examinations of Eliot’s original manuscripts. His extremely detailed and frequently cited book is a key work in any investigation of the various publication forms of Middlemarch. Beaty provides detailed evidence about the two original stories for this

60 Beaty, *Middlemarch from Notebook to Novel*.


novel, that of Lydgate, a country physician and the unfortunate husband of the self-centered Rosamond, and that of Dorothea Brooke, who makes an equally unfortunate match with the aging scholar, Casaubon. In examining the original manuscript versions these two stories, Beaty notes that each plot is written on papers with a different watermark, and by this he determines that the stories were originally independently written. Much of the rest of Beaty’s book researches, through manuscript and quarry review, exactly how the two storylines come together in the ultimate novel; as the book progresses, the two stories are increasingly interrelated, starting in adjacent chapters, but finally often joining in the same chapter. This union becomes closer as Dorothea’s new love interest is gradually shown to be related to multiple other characters in the town of Middlemarch. Beaty concludes his argument by remarking extensively on the effective culmination of the novel in which Dorothea finally meets Rosamond, and he shows in detail how Eliot created this meeting.63

**Middlemarch in Eight Parts**

As she wrote *Middlemarch*, Eliot and her common-law husband and business partner George Henry Lewes realized that it would potentially be a very long novel, well beyond the three-volume set that was standard for most long novels of this time. Joanne Shattock also makes the point that Eliot’s publisher John Blackwood had witnessed the publication of less successful four-volume novels by other authors.64 This experience led

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63 Beaty, *Middlemarch from Notebook to Novel*.

to the compromise set forth by George Henry Lewes of eight cheaper half-volumes to be put forth bimonthly, and later published as a four-volume set. Blackwood ultimately agreed to this novel experiment that would begin with the publication of eight half-volumes.

An examination of George Eliot’s letters reveals this from publisher John Blackwood in a letter dated May 23, 1870: “I had an hour’s talk with George Eliot today. In spite of that stern moralist Langford I shall always regard and esteem her. She is working away at her novel but is not so far on as she intended to be. She gave me a long account of their views of her hopes and fears about it. It promises to be something wonderful – English provincial life.”\textsuperscript{65} Nonetheless, despite the report of this conversation, there is surprisingly little from Eliot herself about the publication plans for this upcoming novel. Instead, there is a long series of exchanges between Blackwood and George Henry Lewes, who seemed to take a great deal of control over decisions of the ultimate format.

There appear to be two reasons for this. First, Eliot was quite ill during this period, and was unable to venture out or even at times to write. Her dependence on Lewes is made clear in letter to her friend Mrs. Charles Bray on October 6, 1871: “Mr. Lewes is exerting his ingenuity to feed me up. He has been housekeeper, secretary and Nurse all in one – as good a nurse as if he had been trained in a hospital.”\textsuperscript{66,67} And

\textsuperscript{65} Eliot, \textit{The George Eliot Letters}, vol. 5, 100.


\textsuperscript{67} In this context, it is worth noting that Eliot’s Quarry for \textit{Middlemarch} is dominated by medical information as she develops the character of Dr. Lydgate. See George Eliot, Quarry for \textit{Middlemarch}: manuscript (Houghton Library, Harvard University, undated).
secondly, Eliot had a great deal of faith in Lewes, on whom she relied extensively, as she notes in a letter to her publisher John Blackwood on September 11, 1871: “Perhaps you do not imagine me as a writer who suffers much from self-distrust and despondency. If I had not had a husband who is not only sympathetic, but so sagacious in criticism that I can rely on his pleasure in my writing as a satisfactory test, it would be difficult for me to bring myself into print. Especially as I have the conviction that excessive literary production is a social offense.”68 This statement – which seems a bit mysterious for a writer as successful as George Eliot was by this point – is a point worth returning to, when we consider the character of her main protagonist, Dorothea Brooke.

It is important to note here that the half-volumes suggested by Lewes, though they might include advertisements, were not part of a magazine but instead stood on their own as independent works. Laurel Brake examines the initial publication of *Middlemarch* in the context of these two contrasting methods of serial publication of fiction in nineteenth-century Britain. Publication in periodicals gave authors less recognition (since some pieces were even published anonymously) and less control over their work. Publication in part-issue form, separate from any periodical, elevated the prominence of the authors and gave them more control over the shape and content of their work. But authors usually had to have already achieved a certain prominence with the reading public to appear in volume form. George Eliot was already well-known when Blackwood accepted her novel *Middlemarch* for publication and agreed to publish the text in eight bi-monthly part-issues, and later in four bound volumes, giving her the maximum of visibility and control. However, Brake makes it clear that nearly all serial publication, including that in part-

issues, looked very different from how the novel would later appear in bound volumes. The presence of colored and decorated wrappers, and of advertisements for many products at the beginning and end of each part-issue, put the literary text in a familiar context for Victorian readers, but one that modern readers never see.69

Carol Martin notes that part publication was common in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Martin states that publication in parts allowed the author to correct misimpressions; Eliot made one such correction to *Middlemarch* in part five. Martin later comments that both Eliot and Lewes were reading Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* at the time that the publication of *Middlemarch* was going forward, and the publication of the French novel in installments may have influenced Lewes’s ideas. The half-volume form had the advantage over shorter magazine-based serial publication in that the installments were significantly longer (180-200 pages), allowing for greater character and plot development. The publisher had an influence both in Eliot’s introducing the *Middlemarch* strand to Part I, and to adding Dorothea’s wedding to Part II; Eliot’s initial quarry suggest that these were to be distinct narratives, but these changes allowed the plot more continuity. Of particular interest here is also Martin’s comparison of Part II with Part VI; both Parts I and II have distinct sections for the Miss Brooke narrative and the *Middlemarch* narrative, but Part VI has much more back-and-forth between these two strands, creating a more unified effect.70

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70 Martin, *George Eliot’s Serial Fiction*. 
The effect of the public response to Eliot’s initially piecemeal production of *Middlemarch* is elaborated further by Martin in her article “Revising Middlemarch.” Martin notes George Henry Lewes tended to protect Eliot from seeing reviews of ongoing and recent work because her reactions to negative criticism were so strong. Despite this, Martin makes a persuasive argument that a series of reviews after the first installment of her serial production of *Middlemarch* had a marked effect on the author: the reviews all focused on the interesting story of Dorothea Brooke, and in essence dictated that the next installment tell the reader more about her plight. Consequently, Lewes and Eliot both decided that the second installment should include Dorothea’s wedding trip, which was originally scheduled to appear in book three. Lewes and Eliot were both concerned that the serial format demanded that each installment hold the reader’s interest, or else books would not be sold. As a result, the two strands of the novel, that of Dorothea and her circle, and that of the characters from the town of Middlemarch, were interspersed more than was originally planned. Here, Martin details how (through Eliot’s response to ongoing reviews after each installment) the serial publication format of *Middlemarch* had a significant effect on the structure of this novel.71 But in this case – unlike Gaskell’s experience with *North and South* – the effects of serialization brought about more integration, rather than a loss of content.

**Modern Analysis of Nineteenth Century Serialization**

Serialized presentation of a novel was not unusual in the nineteenth century, and the most prominent examples were the novels of Charles Dickens, who wrote in this

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format. A thought-provoking article by Susan Bernstein and Catherine DeRose in 2012 reports on a computerized digital analysis (using the program DocuScope) of the writing of Dickens (comparing weekly to monthly serial formats) and Eliot (comparing serialized novels to volume-only novels). Important findings include: (1) For Dickens, weekly installments emphasize setting and plot over character, while monthly installments were more preoccupied with character and dialogue; (2) for Eliot, the serialized novels include more characters referring to future states and behaviors (i.e. plot), while non-serialized novels show less certainty about what will or what will not happen; (3) the volume-only Eliot novels show more attention to the inner states and outer descriptions of characters than the serials; and (4) Eliot’s volume-only novels include more references to language and the act of writing, and are therefore more reflexive.72

However, it should be noted that this research process is not exact. Bernstein and De Rose note that “it does not signify individual novels, but takes groups of novels as its base of analysis (in this case, serials versus non-serials).”73 Deciding what form her novels should take was also often a complicated process for Eliot, Lewes, and her publishers. As Carol Martin notes, their correspondence indicates ambivalence over the issue of serialization while Eliot was writing Adam Bede, which may explain why some of the endings of various sections are equally as dramatic as those of sections of books issued in parts, and some of the beginnings are somewhat repetitive, reminding readers of events that should be memorable for someone reading a multi-volume book all at once.

73 Bernstein and DeRose, “Reading Numbers by Numbers,” 45.
Textually, *Mill on the Floss* gives fewer examples of such conventions, and the correspondence about this book includes earlier instances of Eliot being hesitant to adopt a serial format, partly due to the recent fallout of having to reveal her true identity as a celebrated author. In contrast, by the time Eliot was writing much of *Romola*, she agreed to a serial format nested within a magazine (with a different publisher who tempted her with a higher advance and payment). However, even reviewers of that novel claimed that the story was too complicated to be a completely successful serial, just as Annette Hopkins determined that Gaskell’s *North and South* was ill-suited to its serialized format. Also, Eliot’s last two novels, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, were both issued in part-volumes and so were initially available in a very different format from the magazine-serialized *Romola* or any of Dickens’s serialized novels. The numbers of pages in Eliot’s eight installments of *Middlemarch* range from 173 to 212 and those for Daniel Deronda are comparable, ranging from 160 to 203. Bernstein and DeRose admit that “Eliot’s part-number issues for these two novels were roughly twice the length of Dickens’s monthly numbers” despite the fact that Dickens put forth similarly very long novels.

These analyses add yet another dimension to how the process of serialization may have changed Eliot’s writing in *Middlemarch*, in this case towards increased attention to her intricate plots. Nonetheless, these tensions in both Gaskell’s and Eliot’s work in serialized formats may be related to their detailed attention to the psychological states of their protagonists, a feature that I argue is related to their understanding of the vicarious positions of their female characters.

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75 Bernstein and DeRose, “Reading Numbers by Numbers,” 46.
Middlemarch in Four Volumes

One ultimate goal of putting forth Middlemarch in eight parts may have been to promote an audience for the more formal publication of the novel in the more expensive four-volume set. In proceeding in this way, both George Henry Lewes and George Eliot showed how highly attuned they were to the success of Eliot’s novels, from the perspective of both enhancing her reputation, as well as a means of making her novels lucrative. Linda Hughes analyzes the commercial publication and promotion of Middlemarch through the lens of Eliot’s controversial character Rosamond Vincy, whom Hughes sees as representing the commercial objects of life. Hughes argues that Eliot’s approach to promotion was more commercial than she herself would admit, likely because of the more active involvement of her partner, George Henry Lewes, who handled many of the promotional details of her writing. But Hughes contrasts the strategy of Middlemarch’s publication in Great Britain with that in America, with the implication that Eliot was not as concerned about the diluting of the text of Middlemarch when it was published serially in New York. Hughes’s argument is especially interesting in suggesting that the contrasting artistic and commercial aspects of Eliot’s writing may have been expressed, to some extent, in the two major themes of the novel, voiced in Eliot’s portrayal of the characters of Dorothea and Rosamond.⁷⁶

Middlemarch in One Volume

Joanne Shattock notes that Eliot’s decision to initially produce her novel in eight staggered installments was a success for Middlemarch, (and to a lesser extent for her next novel, Daniel Deronda). But soon thereafter, with the reduced cost of paper leading to the direct purchase of more books, the tide turned in favor of cheaper one-volume editions, which worked against the longer and more intricate novel, of which Middlemarch is perhaps the finest example in nineteenth-century Britain. After 3000 copies of Middlemarch were printed, Eliot had the chance to make corrections and changes for a cheaper one-volume edition, at which point she changed the negative attitude of Middlemarch society towards Dorothea’s marriage to Casaubon to a more philosophical and accepting stance. It was this volume that set the text of the novel for subsequent editions.77

Henry James, a younger contemporary of George Eliot’s, stated that Middlemarch “is a treasure-house of details, but it is an indifferent whole.”78 James criticized Eliot for weaving two stories into one (an enterprise which he had apparently considered in his own work but had rejected). He suggests that, despite the obvious brilliance and intellectual power of Middlemarch, this approach of combining two plot lines destroyed the inherent unity of the work. But Kerry McSweeney cites Eliot’s 1868 essay ‘Notes on Form in Art,’ in which Eliot suggests that artistic form is enhanced by oppositional elements. McSweeney herself feels that Middlemarch is indeed an imperfect whole, but she argues that Eliot’s goal was to convey the “felt representation of human experience,”


78 Eliot, Middlemarch: An Authoritative Text, 578.
rather than artistic perfection. I would go one step further than either of these critics in suggesting that the strength of *Middlemarch* lies in its complexity. In my reading, the interactive pieces of Middlemarch are an essential element in making it a great novel, a result of its publishing history – in which the medium truly determined at least some of the construction of the message – fortuitously paired with Eliot’s psychological insights, these last in part fostered by her gendered experience.

**George Eliot and Dorothea Brooke in Historical Context**

For George Eliot, then – unlike Elizabeth Gaskell in the case of *North and South* – part-issue serialization appeared to benefit the end-product of her novel *Middlemarch*. This format allowed significant exposition, but also forced Eliot – through feedback from both publisher and audience – to better integrate the disparate parts that were the original source of the novel. Nonetheless, one has the sense of a lack of confidence in this great writer, who deferred to her common-law husband Lewes to essentially run interference for her in the publishing world. This relationship can also be used as a lens through which to read the unusual Prelude to the novel, in which Eliot describes the life of Saint Theresa, after which she notes:

> Many Theresas have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action; perhaps only a life of mistakes, the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity…

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For Eliot, Dorothea was one such person, a character who lived a largely vicarious life through two different husbands, her efforts towards social reform largely (and eventually) enacted through her alliance with her second husband.

There is perhaps a resonance here with Eliot’s own experience. The novel was set between the years 1829 to 1833, when suffrage in England was first extended to an increased number of men, but not to women. While Eliot was not an active suffragist, her sensitivities would hardly allow her to miss the implications of those politics for women. Notably, her quarry describes this Reform Act as “a bill to establish…universal suffrage & vote by ballot.” In her novel, Eliot quietly fills in the larger political background of the nation: the shift from Tory to Whig control of Parliament, about which several of the novel’s characters have strong opinions, and the passage of the First Reform Bill of 1832, which would play a large role in gradually bringing England’s social classes into more direct contact over the next century. This large novel, formally set in a rather out of the way corner of English life, keeps its actors, with their distinct personalities, varied economic interests, and contrasting social class, realistically separate, yet unifies all of them in the larger changes affecting country estates, provincial towns, and the nation’s Houses of Parliament. Thus, the varied interactions of these characters mirror the social and political movements of both the setting of the novel, as well as the time that the novel was written, which was shortly after the Second Reform Act of 1867, when some expected that women might receive the vote.\(^81\)

Eliot’s heroine Dorothea is regarded with a significant measure of respect by the characters in *Middlemarch*, who find her intelligent, wise, observant and (like Margaret Hale) a successful mediator. Yet again, this position is won by an enforced role as an observer of others in a world where her actions are limited by her gender. For at the end of the novel, the narrator says of Eliot’s protagonist:

Certainly those determining acts of her life were not ideally beautiful. They were the mixed result of young and noble impulse struggling amidst the conditions of an imperfect social state, in which great feelings will often take the aspect of error, and great faith the aspect of illusion. For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it. 82

This forthright statement, almost modern in its sensibility, echoes Tennyson’s poem at the beginning of Gaskell’s serialized novel. I would contend that in both the cases of Margaret Hale and Dorothea Brooke, fortune did indeed clip their wings, but their authors, in saying so, rise above this situation.

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Conclusion: The Constrained Life

In choosing to create social novels, both Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot entered the arena of social activism. Gaskell’s focus on the Industrial Revolution and the power differential between owners and workers more obviously addresses social ills, a situation that Gaskell attempts to resolve through a nuanced understanding of both sides of that divide. Eliot’s provincial life also reveals the strong role that money can play in attaining power, though interestingly, Dorothea foregoes a portion of that power when she gives up part of her inheritance to marry Will. Both writers claim a kind of bittersweet experience for their heroines, who despite their ability to maintain some independence and wealth, are aware of their own limitations and are extremely sensitive to the deprivations of others less lucky than themselves. In this sense, their limitations also bring forth a strength, in that the female characters portrayed here command great respect from a variety of other characters in these novels and are regarded as both wise and effective mediators. Interestingly, both these protagonists end up being wealthier than their husbands, perhaps a comment on one of the few ways in which women of that day could exert power, though given that the first Married Women’s Property Bill wasn’t passed in Britain until 1870, it was a very limited and dependent kind of power.

As noted, both Gaskell and Eliot put forth these social novels through serialization. This process demands some subjugation of the individual author to audience and (often male) publisher, but my review of the letters of these female authors suggests that their experience of serialization was different. Gaskell felt confined by both the demands of the medium of the magazine she was writing for, as well as by the controls exerted by its famous publisher, Charles Dickens, complaining that her work felt
“compressed.” It is worth noting that the publication of North and South occurred in the beginning of Gaskell’s writing career, and that her lack of standing as an established author certainly weighed in regarding her ability to push back on the demands imposed upon her. In addition, the weekly format of Household Words was hardly ideal for her material – with twenty-two pieces, it was perhaps inevitable that she would encounter difficulties in crafting the series of breaks, and the limitations of space in a magazine with many other contributions. While Gaskell did indeed return to serialized novels at the end of her career, she did not choose either a weekly format or, for that matter, editing by Charles Dickens. Presumably, these later works were accomplished with less editorial pruning and with more satisfaction (and apparently remuneration) on her part.

Eliot’s letters, on the other hand, suggest she appreciated the help of both her publisher as well as her common-law husband who managed the publication details. Eliot’s work seemed to benefit from the demands of an audience-dependent serialized format, which forced her to integrate the various parts of her complex novel more effectively. It is important to note, however, that Eliot by this point had numerous successes under her belt, and so was well supported by her publishing team, though even so she suffered under the time pressure that serialization of an unfinished work inevitably brings.

Part of the disparity between the experiences of Gaskell and Eliot may be due to the differences between weekly magazine and part-issue formats, though it is equally likely that the personalities involved – especially those of Charles Dickens and George Henry Lewes – had different effects on the authors involved with them. It is interesting to note that while Elizabeth Gaskell had less power with her publishers, she created a
character who inherits significant inherited wealth (and power). George Eliot, who appears to have had a more supportive experience, created a protagonist who loses the considerable wealth that she might have inherited from Casaubon as she finds happiness with a second husband.

Nonetheless, both these heroines – perhaps like their authors – are mediators, wise observers, but live somewhat vicariously with an awareness of their limited power. This authorial choice was made by Elizabeth Gaskell despite the fact that she spent much time during the writing of North and South at the home of Florence Nightingale, who at the time was a model of action and industry. Gaskell writes about Nightingale extensively in her letters of this period, noting in a letter in mid-October 1854 to Catherine Wentworth: “…she seems as completely led by God as Joan of Arc…I never heard of anyone like her – it makes one feel the livingness of God more than ever to think how straight He is sending his spirit down into her, as into the prophets & saints of old.”83 Yet Gaskell did not model Margaret Hale, for all her strength and fortitude, on anyone like Florence Nightingale.

And Florence Nightingale herself was critical of the inaction of George Eliot’s Dorothea. While Nightingale was quite taken with Eliot’s depiction of the radical priest Savonarola in Eliot’s earlier work Romola, she chastises the author for her creation of Dorothea in an 1873 article appearing in Fraser’s Magazine: “This author can now find no better outlet for the heroine, also an idealist, because she cannot be a St Teresa or an Antigone, than to marry an elderly sort of literary imposter and, quick after him, his

relation, a baby sort of itinerant Cluricaune or inferior Faun.”84 Nightingale goes on to describe a close friend of hers who by her charitable actions lived out her ideal. Yet Eliot too did not create a St. Theresa or even a Florence Nightingale for Middlemarch – her authorial choice was again a woman who lived a life of limitation. But I would argue – in both cases – that these authors were more interested in the psychological state of women than in the effected actions that a few might accomplish. By creating the bittersweet moment, they are revealing the deeper insights and wisdom that can sometimes accompany such holding back – in this sense, I have argued throughout this thesis that a psychological space of insight and observation was opened in these characters – and by extension in the writers themselves – by this loss.

Finally, I would argue that the process of serialization in the nineteenth century, with its increased back and forth between writer and publisher often documented in the many letters written in that day, also opens up a psychological space for critical readers. Each of these letters, and each serialized segment of these novels, are like single frames in what would ordinarily be a seamless process of creation. Serialization and its related correspondence sheds light on the power dynamics between women writers and the male publishers surrounding them and helps to make sense of the constrained yet psychologically complex characters that they created in these novels.

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