

The Reconciliation of Myth and History in George Eliot's Middlemarch

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The Union of Myth and Historical Reality in Middlemarch

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A Synopsis of the article's main argument:

Middlemarch, in contrast to Adam Bede, represents the accomplishment of two apparently irreconcilable tasks. George Eliot succeeded in creating both a realistic novel about contemporary conditions and a Victorian romance.Â Â

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In her monograph *The Triptych and the Cross* Felicia Bonaparte is concerned with - to quote the book's subtitle - "the central mythos of George Eliot's Imagination." (1) Yet, as F. Bonaparte herself is well aware, George Eliot shows throughout her work a predilection for concrete historical settings and a keen interest in all that impinges on historical and societal reality. In unravelling this paradox, Bonaparte rejects the general line in Eliot criticism when she contends that Eliot is first and foremost a poet, that is, a writer who sees the world in essentially poetic terms even though her chosen literary medium belongs formally to the domain of prose fiction (2). This paper will focus on Bonaparte's claims in relation to a comparative study of some of the mythical and historical references found in *Adam Bede* and *Middlemarch*. A brief review of Northrop Frye's definition of "myth" will serve to provide a "history"™.

In terms of popular usage - but only in such terms - myth and history are antithetical concepts: The Battle of Hastings really took place, Jupiter's rape of Europe did not. On a philosophical level myth and history present two ways of looking at and interpreting the same object, the succession of phenomena in time. In the historical view such phenomena compose a series of unrepeatable events, which is not to say that events occurring at different times are of necessity dissimilar or unrelated. The myth, on the other hand, springs from the ability of the mind to capture in poetic imagery

what is perceived or intuited as the reality underlying a cycle of events. The recognition of such patterns or abstractions finds expression in metaphorical terms not necessarily limited to such stock images as birds, classical gods etc. With Eliot even the common things of life can take on mythical significance. As Northrop Frye emphasises, our sense of cyclical time derives from our experience of the natural cycle of the seasons. Each season connotes an attitude to the basic realities of life and death as they affect human destiny. On the basis of this premise, Frye relates the spring to comedy, summer to romance, winter to tragedy and winter to satire. Furthermore, it is only with reference to "the mythical phase" that separate works of literature may be classified in genres or, indeed, classified at all. In its formal phase, each work comprises a unique "object" to be treated only in terms of its individual specificity. In the "mythical" phase the of individual works are transcended by an unity that must be postulated before works can be compared and classified. In according to Frye's theory, the differences of genre pertaining to works considered in their setting within the mythic phase are themselves abolished at the yet higher level which Frye terms "the anagogic phase". One inference to be drawn from Frye's literary theories concurs with F. Bonaparte's application of the term "poetic" to Eliot's prose fiction. Poetry a term dependent on considerations of genre but rather on the writer approach to basic questions concerning myth, history, metaphoric language etc. To this extent Eliot is a Romantic, since her novels reflect the Romantic intention to conflate all genres into one unified form ("Romantic" derives from "Roman").

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A consideration of Frye's categories may help towards an appreciation of the similarities and difference between Adam Bede and Middlemarch. In respect to these novels, only two of Frye's season-related categories come into question, though there are strong tragic and satirical elements in both works. Faced with the option of choosing between "comedy" and "romance" as the more pertinent term, one would have few reservations in deciding on the former as that most applicable to Adam Bede even though the subplot concerned with the love affair of Arthur and Hetty has a tragic outcome. In Middlemarch tragedy and comedy come closer to a state of equipoise than in Adam Bede. While Dorothea and Will eventually attain married bliss, Lydgate and Rosamond resign themselves to a loveless conjugal union. The marriage of Dorothea and Will does not herald a general change in society at large, as does the marriage of Dinah and Adam. Middlemarch as the embodiment of British society remains indifferent, if not downright inimical, to individuals and their quest for happiness.

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Both novels concern in various ways the interaction of individuals and their moral and psychological development with their general historical environment. In comparing the novels, however, we must account for a fundamental shift in emphasis as a result of which the hero or heroine is no longer to be seen as the analogue of a historical principal, say, the embodiment of a force promoting social justice and informed democracy. Adam Bede's quest for personal fulfilment directly engages forces at work in society at large. In surmounting all obstacles to his personal happiness, Adam effects a social revolution. Adam and Dinah thus become the central representative figures of the Divine Comedy. In Middlemarch, on the other hand, so direct a link between the private career of individuals and the course of history is nowhere in evidence. Not only is the path to marital bliss incomparably more arduous than in Adam Bede, the pitfalls in its way more treacherous, but its eventual attainment by Dorothea and Will neither symbolizes nor influences historical and social change. To use the words found in the concluding chapter of the novel, the equivalents of Theresa and Antigone in Victorian times are "insignificant people", whose heroic sacrifices make no apparent impact on their surroundings, which, lacking any definition in terms of historical orientation, assume the amorphous and temporally ill-defined quality of a "medium". (3)

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The effective separation of the private domain and the sphere of historical action means not only the loss of reciprocal influence but, on the positive side, a new-found autonomy for both. A major result of this process is the realism that distinguishes Middlemarch from Adam Bede. The interaction of Dorothea, Will, Rosamond and Tertius is plausible as the end result of private emotions, ambitions and rivalries; as readers we are no longer beset by afterthoughts about the wider symbolic significance of this or that action, nor have we cause to worry about missing a subtle reference to extraneous facts and theories. We feel that Dorothea and Will eventually marry because they love each other, and not,

as one may suspect on the case of Adam and Dinah, to epitomize the fusion of Anglican and Methodist influences or the marriage of the Evangelical social conscience and industrial development in Victorian England.

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As a mirror of Victorian England, Middlemarch presents a species of realism unattainable in Adam Bede. While in the latter case the new age represented by Adams accession to power is necessarily idealized along with Adam and Dinah, Victorian society, the medium in which Dorothea, Will, Casaubon and others exist and interact, is shown in Middlemarch to lack any effective guiding principle or moral cohesion. If anything, money and the acquisition of power based on its use provide the motivation for the conduct of those, such as Bulstrode and Casaubon represent the pillars of Middlemarch society. Strictly speaking, we should not apply "Victorian" as an epithet to either Hayslope and Middlemarch as the years 1799 and 1832 antedated Victoria's reign. Both dates, however, represent cardinal points of reference in fixing the historical moment when the foundations of Victorian society were established. In Adam Bede the temporal location of the novel's setting (at the pivotal point of two centuries) underpins the note of triumph on which the novel ends. In Middlemarch a new era, though hoped-for by the reformers, never dawns. The one figure in the novel who has faith in the achievement of a better future, Lydgate, falls victim to the cares of the present and "the dead hand" of the past.

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It does not follow from what has been stated above that Eliot totally renounces the millennial optimism that underlies Adam Bede to the point of expressing purely relativistic philosophy in Middlemarch. The issue of inter-subjectivity takes on much greater significance and becomes subject to a more subtle, less overtly moralistic, treatment than that found in Adam Bede. Nonetheless, the readers of Middlemarch are not left entirely to their own devices when framing their attitudes to Bulstrode's dealings with Raffles or Casaubon's attempts to thwart a future marriage of Dorothea and Will. Indeed, the forms of self-deception in which they indulge are of a much more insidious and consequential nature than those of Arthur Donnithorne or Hetty. Through private initiative and collective action, the effects of Arthur's and Hetty's wrongful behaviour are finally contained and mitigated. In Middlemarch no such comfort can be derived from the outcome of events. Dorothea is fortuitously saved from lifelong thralldom to Casaubon's will in the nick of time by the event of her first husband's sudden death. If even those who are supposedly the mainstay of society are morally blind, the body politic is threatened by no ordinary contagion but one as insidious as a notorious syndrome afflicting today's world. Middlemarch manifests a tendency traceable in the works of other nineteenth century novelists from Balzac and Dickens to Dostoevsky towards what proponents of liberation theology now see as a world demonized by capitalism. Traditional images of devils with pitchforks and barbed tails were discarded and replaced by devious lawyers, capitalist manipulators or perhaps worst of all, amorphous institutions such as Chancery in Dickens's Bleak House. Eliot's allusions to demonic powers are far more discrete and tentative than those made by Dickens (in such a case as the "spontaneous combustion" in Bleak House) yet Casaubon's power over Dorothea has within it all the essentials of an evil spell. As Lydgate learned to his great cost, whoever sups with Bulstrode, should use a long spoon. (4) Yet neither Casaubon nor Bulstrode is the epitome of an evil man or even an unscrupulous manipulator. In the Aristotelian sense of the word, they are tragic figures possessing, along with indubitable virtues, one fundamental flaw, their inability to face up to an unpleasant truth. Both try to make up for their lack by taking advantage of the influence and power derived from wealth. They are themselves the victims of a system devoid of humanizing values. Evil ultimately resides in the system rather than in individual personalities. In Middlemarch events reveal that "the truth will out" rather than that good automatically triumphs. While in Adam Bede the old regime is replaced by a better one, Middlemarch reveals more tentatively that through virtue and integrity individuals can escape the noxious influences of their environment. Middlemarch does not necessarily show that society is incapable of genuine reform, only that the course of progress may be excruciatingly slow and imperceptible. It is advanced less in the public arena than in the seclusion of private life. To the extent that in Middlemarch the public and private realms are separated by a fundamental dichotomy, a Augustinian division of reality into the temporal and spiritual (or the romantic polarity of the self and the world) comes into play. In Adam Bede by contrast, social decorum comes before individual freedom. Those who offend the laws the community usually do so in a location set apart at both a physical and a metaphorical distance from civilization as represented by a town and homestead. The lovers' meetings of Arthur and Hetty and the violence Adam perpetrated on Arthur take place in a lonely natural setting. The common where Dinah preaches carries more positive connotations, but she too is in a sense tamed by civilization. As a married woman she no longer preaches in the open.

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When we consider the associations that attend the motif of exile as variously treated in Adam Bede and Middlemarch a fundamental change in terms of reference becomes apparent. In Adam Bede exile awaits those, such as Arthur Donnithorne, who offend the mores of a social group. Once exposed, Bulstrode must also become an exile from the society in which he had played a leading role, though we suspect that his gravest sin was that of being found out rather than the lack of moral principles itself. It is only when we consider how the concept of exile is applicable to Will Ladislaw that its positive re-evaluation is evident. In this we trace the residual influence of Romanticism. The romantic outsider differs from the rebel or misfit of earlier periods as one set apart from society not by his or her own faults but rather by dint of the individual's uncompromising integrity, his or her fidelity to an inward vision. The individual is too good for established society, not the other way round. It is therefore particularly significant that Will is referred to as "a gypsy" on several occasions. Here the term is not an expression of contempt from the lips of his detractors, who preferred to cast him as "a Polish emissary" or the "grandson of a thieving Jew". (5) When speaking to his wife after Ladislaw's Lydgate speaks, condescendingly perhaps but with no trace of rancour, of Will as "a sort of gypsy", and adds, "He has nothing of leather and prunella."

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(6) Later the narrator, reminding the reader of Lydgate's metaphor, interprets the word "gypsy" with an allusive reference to the Romantics' positive evaluation of the gypsy as the wanderer outside the pale of conformity and settled life. Lydgate had said of him, "He was a sort of gypsy, rather enjoying the sense of belonging to no class, he had a feeling of romance in his position and a pleasant consciousness of creating a little surprise wherever he went". (7)

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A few pages on in the same chapter (XLVI), the word "gypsy" crops up again in a context which throws further light on the word's romantic connotations in the scheme of the novel. The narrative speaker tells of Will's felicitous relationship with a troop of children in terms reminiscent of the Pied Piper (In Browning's famous poem the Piper wears a "gypsy coat of red and yellow"), and speaks of "children he led out on gypsy expeditions to Halsell Wood at Nutting time". (8). Will's affinity with children and his love of music and poetry underline his innate Romantic nature. The calumnies hurled against him by his detractors, Casaubon and Sir James, rationalize the emotions of fear and jealousy aroused in those disconcerted by presence of one who is spiritually their superior. Perhaps Casaubon's deep antagonism to Will, transcending a purely personal rivalry, springs from the fact that Casaubon is himself a would-be Romantic rather than one to whom any Romantic notion or sentiment is foreign. What, in a sense, could be more Romantic than the quest for the key to understanding the unity of all mythologies? Casaubon lacks that most essential of Romantic attributes, a creative imagination and with it the intuition to recognize in nature and history the workings of what Coleridge termed "the Primary Imagination". Thus his attitude to acquiring data merely complements his materialistic acquisition of wealth. As a man unworthy of his high ambition Casaubon is pathetic rather than repugnant, a fact which makes Dorothea's readiness to marry him out of sympathy psychologically plausible. Yet as a Romantic-materialist hybrid, Casaubon is potentially a much more dangerous threat to innocence than Bulstrode with his guilty past, for Casaubon contends for the possession of Dorothea's very soul. When visiting Dorothea in Rome, Will senses that he and Casaubon are fixed in the sort of mortal conflict that takes place in fairy tales and the legendary past. A passage from Chapter XX is particularly telling:

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"She (Dorothea) must have made some original romance for herself in this marriage. And if Mr Casaubon had been a dragon who had carried her off to his lair with his talons simply and without legal forms, It would have been an unavoidable feat of heroism to release her and fall at her feet. But he was something more than a dragon: he was a benefactor with collective society at his back,..". (9)

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The key word in this passage, one may argue strongly, is "romance". This word, which originally signified a poem or epic written in the vernacular Old French, not medieval Latin, lies etymologically and by no means accidentally at the root of the term "Romantic". Particularly Novalis among the Germans and Victor Hugo among the French drew on the tradition of the medieval epic as an inspirational source and a store of symbolic motifs expressing the drama of good and evil in conflict. To this nexus belong all stories about the heroic knight who slays an evil dragon, a motif constituting one of the earliest and most popular legendary strands in the medieval epic tradition with roots in Biblical symbolism according to which the dragon represents the powers of evil and destruction (Revelation, Ch. 12). Does it follow that Middlemarch poses something close to an allegory in which, to use a term applied by Northrop Frye, mythical archetypes are displaced by the realistically treated characters of "low mimetic" fiction? In the passage just quoted the narrative speaker warns against an all too facile identification of characters in the novel with symbolic archetypes: Casaubon was "more than a dragon" in being "a benefactor with collective society at his back". One reason for Eliot's double feat of writing romance and a novel that convinces by its psychological and historical realism has been suggested. The interpersonal relations of the characters, though placed in a realistic historical setting, are not construed as having a demonstrable link with historical causation. Furthermore, Eliot's achievement in Middlemarch does not lie in any skill of matching inherently unrelated elements: rather it is attributable - if we lend credence to F. Bonaparte's arguments - to the fact that Eliot discovered that the objects of realist description "must be apprehended poetically. In other words, Eliot's writing accords with the idea put forward by Schlegel that the novel (Roman) should comprehend all literary genres in expressing the romantic ideals of totality and universality. (10)

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The passage last quoted is immediately preceded by a sentence in which reference is made to the Aeolian harp, which represented to Coleridge and other Romantics the unity of nature and art through their mystical interaction. It may prove illuminating to consider to what extent the use of imagery in Middlemarch underscores the intimate connection between the basic mythic and archetypal structural organisation of the novel and the symbolism of the natural cycle in terms construed by Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism*.

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Frye sees in the myth of the dragon-slayer, or cognate figure, the central paradigm of the "mythos" of summer: In *Anatomy of Criticism* he states:

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"The conflict (between the hero and his enemy) takes place in, or at any rate primarily concerns, our world, which is in the middle, and which is characterized by the cyclical movement of nature. Hence the opposite poles of the gyration of nature are assimilated to the opposition of the hero and his enemy. The enemy is associated with winter, darkness, confusion, sterility, moribund life, and old age, and the hero with spring, dawn, order, fertility, vigour and youth".

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One major point of difference between Adam Bede and Middlemarch lies in the nature of the conflicts they are concerned to reveal. Adam's antagonist is a man of his own age. Behind the conflict of Arthur and Adam we discover the motif of the contest of equals, mythically typified as brothers (Cain and Abel, Romulus and Remus etc.) for domination of the realm.

In Eliot's aesthetically unsuccessful epic poem "Jubal" Cain is positively treated as the founder of civilization. In Middlemarch, however, as the general title of Book II indicates, the central conflict on which the novel revolves is that between "Old and Young". The old is represented by men who, though not senile or decrepit, are in the declining years of life. While old age personified by a sage with a long snow white beard often connotes wisdom, serenity and gentleness in literature as elsewhere, declining middle age, typified by descriptions referring to "greyness", traditionally carries few positive connotations, rather ungracious decline, cantankerous resentment, the fear of being ousted by the young, obstinacy and power mania. It is therefore significant that the quotation heading Chapter XLVIII, which culminated in Casaubon's death, begins: "Surely the golden hours are turning grey". Words in this chapter connoting spiritual and emotional death abound: "Everything seemed dreary" - "a dull shiver" - "the weariness of long future days" - "a dull glow on the hearth". Death is here altogether different from the kind inflicted by "the keen-edged blow" that Dorothea's refusal to bow down to her husband's will might have inflicted. The imagery in the chapter not only makes direct references to death, as in "virtual tomb" and "devotion to the dead", but to the analogous zones of darkness, deprivation of sunlight and coldness. It should be remembered that the chapter ends in the deliverance of Dorothea (and possibly Casaubon too) brought about, paradoxically by the advent of physical death. Casaubon is found "sleeping" in the summerhouse and not where Dorothea expected to meet him, in the yew-tree walk. Northrop Frye associated the conflict to the old and the young with the contrasting notions of sterility and fertility. Though Victorian prudishness may have discouraged Eliot from making the point too obvious, Will must have been particularly galled by the thought of Casaubon's enjoyment of his conjugal rights. It is significant that Dorothea bears Casaubon no children, while in her marriage to Will she becomes a mother. The sacrifice she is prepared to make in promising Casaubon she will never marry Ladislav is, to judge by the choice of words associated with her imminent vow ("I submit," "I am ready") no different from a young woman's so-called "sacrifice" in laying down her virginity. (12)

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Frye concludes the section "The Mythos of Summer: Romance" with a passage concerned with "the point of epiphany" which typically marks the culmination point of the romance. (13) Frye relates the story of the final temptation of Jesus by Satan, which in Frye's view marks such a point of epiphany, to the upward and downward movement of the natural cycle before and after the highpoint of summer. Satan's hopes for victory are dashed at the very point when total victory appears imminent. In the Gospels this sudden loss of advantage is associated with the height of the pinnacle of the temple where the final temptation takes place. In a recognizable similar manner, Casaubon's scheme to entrap Dorothea is thwarted only when its success seems ^ assured.

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There are characteristics of the romance, however, which do not accord with Middlemarch, superficially at least. According to Frye, the heroic characters in the quest-romance are like the black and white pieces in a chess game in being either for or against the quest and what it stands for. (14). While Will and Dorothea engage the readers' sympathy as noble and good characters, neither Casaubon nor Bulstrode is a straightforward villain. It is yet more difficult to apply the terms "black and white" to Rosamond, Lydgate and Cecilia. We should perhaps discard the "black and white" "good and evil" in favour of "the best" versus "that which threatens to compromise it". Certainly the extreme acuity of vision imputed to the narrative speaker reveals the pernicious consequences of those hidden faults which the Law cannot probe and society too often overlooks. The enormity of a fault, one may argue, depends on the severity of the standard by which faults are judged.

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Is it appropriate to speak of Dorothea and Will as romantic heroes, what of Adam Bede, for that matter? Adam might be regarded as a Promethean figure like Manfred or Hernani, were it not for the fact that the traditional Romantic hero, though he may challenge and overthrow the tyranny of the old order, cannot realize his essentially Utopian vision in the establishment of a new order of his own making. His vision corresponds neither to any extant order nor to any that is achievable in his lifetime. What we find in the person of Adam Bede is perhaps the model of the Early Victorian "New Man", half Romantic, half social meliorist, who was less concerned with the immediate establishment of the Millennium than with the reform of society through rational compromise. In Adam Bede the action and events as described there are subsumed in the person of the central protagonist whose name provides the title of the book. Middlemarch on the other hand is, as its very name suggests, the meeting place or "medium" in which people interact. Dorothea poses the most important and interesting character in the novel but she is not central after the manner of Adam. The story of Lydgate and Rosamond is not a subplot nor is the story of Dorothea, Casaubon and Will the main plot. The plots run parallel from beginning to end (contrast with the convergent narrative sequences in Bleak House). The story of Dorothea was originally conceived without reference to the original project of Middlemarch. Reasons why the action of the novel cannot be subsumed under a person's name have been discussed with reference to a severance of the causal link between personal and social action. If Dorothea is not a Romantic heroine in the complete sense, her alienation from Victorian society at a time when the optimism that characterized the early Victorian era was spent roughly parallels the alienation experienced by the Romantics after their disillusionment with the French Revolution. She, like many Romantics, was consigned to the life of a spiritual exile or recluse but in this, unlike most Romantics, she found fulfilment and contentment.

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Do we conclude that Middlemarch poses a Victorian romance? If so, we must qualify our terms myth and romance considerably so as to do justice to the psychological realism and the convincing portrayal of Victorian society also achieved in the novel. Eliot evidently did more than dress up old legends in Victorian clothes. We may assert with F. Bonaparte that Eliot achieved in her later novels a poetic rendering of prose fiction affecting the structural organization of the novel at the deepest level. At this level we discover the myths and topoi of earlier times, the dragon or the gypsy. Yet Eliot remains true to her vocation as a novelist. The novelistic form is notoriously recalcitrant to all attempts to categorize it in terms of form and genre. It was left to Eliot to accomplish what Romantic theorists such as Friedrich Schlegel had posited in theory, a novel in which poetry becomes the unifying and shape-giving principle transcending particularities of genre, acting on the limitless material offered by contemporary life and society.

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(1) Felicia Bonaparte, *The Triptych and the Cross The Central Mythos of George Eliot's Imagination* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1979).

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(2) Bonaparte, pp. 4,14.

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(3) Middlemarch A Study in Provincial Life (1874; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1964), p.81.

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(4) Raffles plays on Bulstrode's first name when alluding to the Devil, i.e. by use of the term "Nick". *ibid.* p. 512.

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(5) *ibid.* pp. 448; 749.

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(6) *ibid.* p. 442.

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(7) *ibid.* p. 447.

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(8) *ibid.* p. 449.

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(9) *ibid.* P. 205.

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(10) Friedrich Schlegel, "Brief über den Roman", in: *Athenäum* (1800; rpt. *Kritische Schriften* ed. Wolfdietrich Rasch. Munich: Hanser, 1964), pp. 500–518.

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(11) Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957; rpt. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), p. 18

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(12) *Middlemarch* ^ pp. 466, 468.

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(13) Frye, p. 206.^

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