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Chaucerian Echoes: Chivalric
Tradition and Gender
Construction in George Eliot's
Middlemarch

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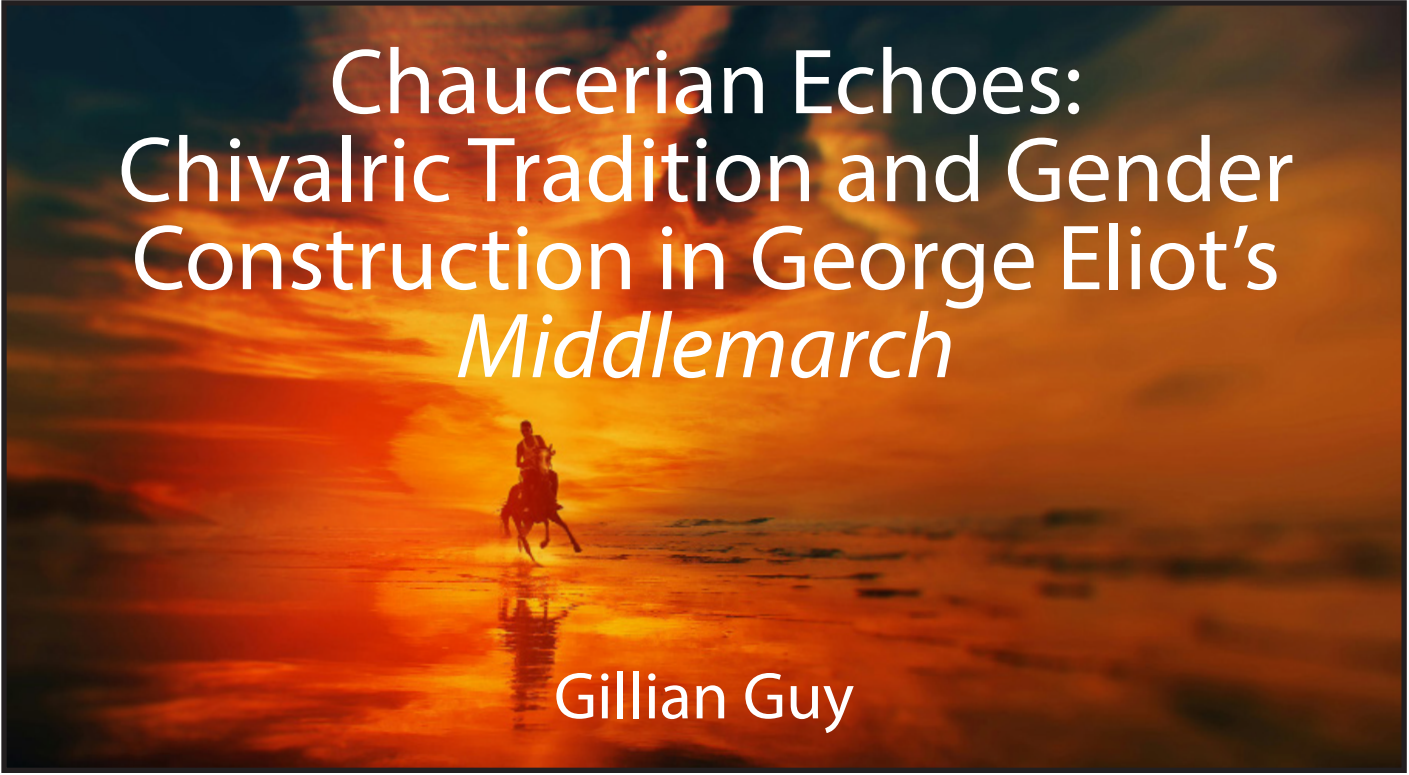
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Chaucerian Echoes: Chivalric Tradition and Gender Construction in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*

Gillian Guy

Abstract

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* critiques Victorian social and gender norms through characters' relationships with each other and with horseback riding. This paper argues that Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* informs the symbolism and literary tropes Eliot uses in crafting her narrative. Analysis of Chaucerian tropes of courtly love and medieval codes of chivalry reveals how characters either maintain or undermine traditional Victorian conventions of masculinity and femininity; these dynamics are primarily seen through horse ownership and horseback riding. One protagonist in particular, Will Ladislaw, is examined in this paper as representing ideas of androgyny through his unconventional relationships with horses and other characters, as well as his medieval approach to love in a Victorian context.

Introduction

Geoffrey Chaucer's romance traditions are impossible to miss in Victorian literature, and George Eliot's 1871 *Middlemarch* is no exception as medieval literary tropes of courtly love and chivalry permeate the narrative. Eliot demonstrates medieval queer and romance discourse through her characters and their choices to ride or not ride horses. As Geoffrey Chaucer did in his late 14th-century epic poem titled *Troilus and Criseyde*, George Eliot weaves threads of conventionality and unconventionality into the relationships she writes. The unusual facets of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* help readers to understand the relationship between Will Ladislaw and Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* as well as the novel's queer gender constructions. In *Middlemarch*, George Eliot uses knightly steeds, associated with medieval chivalry and chivalric courtly love, to construct femininity, masculinity, and androgyny. The relationship between characters and their horses throughout the text mirrors medieval courting traditions, where the horse can establish who maintains the "male" or "female" role in the relationship. When evaluating their relationships to horses through the masculine context of knighthood, the characters of *Middlemarch* subvert traditional gender and relationship dynamics.

Horses and Masculinity

The characters' interactions with horses in *Middlemarch* reflect their arcs. Beryl Gray argues in her article "Riding Horses in Middlemarch" that the steeds of Middlemarch riders are extensions of their emotions (11). Eliot uses horseback riding as an external tool for the reader to further understand each character and how gender roles inform their story arcs; this is executed through the characters' independent interactions, or lack thereof, with horses. Despite Rosamond and Dorothea having notable horseback riding experiences, these experiences serve only to affirm the narrative impacts of their femininity. The primary riders in *Middlemarch* are men, bringing to mind the medieval concept of chivalry, in which the image of a person on horseback would invoke the male gender immediately. Horses are an extension of their knight, and the two work together to build up the chivalrous figure.

The original, medieval word "chivalry" is attributed to the specific status of being a warrior on horseback.

Given the amount of destruction that could come from an armed man with a fast means of transportation, a special code of conduct was prescribed to uphold order. The *Oxford Dictionary of British History* writes, "[chivalry] was important in creating a social bond between the crown, nobility, and gentry, and in generating the code of behaviour expected of a gentleman, demanding personal honour, generosity, loyalty, and courage" ("Chivalry"). The aspect of chivalry most relevant to this paper is the pursuit of a female lover by a male knight. Chivalric code revolved primarily around the protection of the Church and nation, as Léon Gautier's 1884 *La Chevalerie* compilation reflects, but chivalry often gets mixed in with courtly love when discussing knighthood.

This combination of chivalry and courtly love can be found in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. In the "Introduction" section for the Oxford World's Classics copy of *Troilus and Criseyde*, translator Barry Windeatt explains the functions of courtly love in Chaucer's tragedy, stating,

In principle, love service is to be accepted as an open-ended commitment, a privilege in itself, but there is also a sense that serving implies deserving, and that loves [sic] fulfillment may be seen as an earned reward after suffering, in the tradition of love as a sickness or even madness for the lover. (xxiv)

This idea reflects the courtly love tradition in which intense sexual love manifests through pain and sickness in the male lover, pressuring the female lover into a healer role.

These spaces are representative of masculine and feminine energy; riding horses is a distinctly public, and therefore masculine, affair.

Through the lens of the chivalric knight, riding horses invokes a "masculine" energy. In this paper, the chivalric perspective of "masculine energy" will be defined as anything taking on dominant and controlling qualities that contrasts a submissive non-equal. According to the Victorian ideology of separate spheres, men in Western culture were ascribed superior positions in

the public sphere, such as work, politics, and commerce, while women were confined to the activities of the private sphere, including domestic responsibilities and family life ("Separate Spheres"). These spaces are representative of masculine and feminine energy; riding horses is a distinctly public, and therefore masculine, affair. The man on horseback could also be a metaphor for the control of a submissive counterpart, representing feminine energy and the implementation of patriarchal ideals, enhancing the masculine energy of riding.

Women on Horseback

The historical objectification of women on horseback turns female riding into a spectacle for the male gaze. The women of *Middlemarch* appear most often in horse-drawn carriages, and instances of them on horseback are rare compared to men. Although not explicitly mentioned in the text, the women likely used a side saddle, designed for both legs to hang off the same side of the horse, to preserve modesty. Dorothea on her horse is only read in connection to how men, or potential suitors, view her. The narrator explains in the first mention of her riding that, "Most men thought [Dorothea] bewitching when she was on horseback. She loved the fresh air and the various aspects of the country, and when her eyes and cheeks glowed with mingled pleasure she looked very little like a devotee" (Eliot 7). Through the act of riding, she becomes the subject of the male gaze. Her riding becomes an extension of male ideals for their potential mates, taking away from her credibility as a "devotee" to God.

In order to maintain her chastity and devotion, she must renounce what is turning her into an object of male temptation: horses. This renunciation of horseback riding does not go over well with Sir James, one of her potential suitors. Sir James tells Dorothea to not give up horsemanship because she is a talented rider; in response, Dorothea cites her weakness of being thrown. Sir James counters, "Every lady ought to be a perfect horsewoman, that she may accompany her husband" (14). Dorothea responds, "You see how widely we differ, Sir James. I have made up my mind that I ought not to be a perfect horsewoman, and so I should never correspond to your pattern of a lady" (14). Dorothea, in casting aside her horse riding capabilities and denying any talent in such a hobby, also

casts aside and denies Sir James and a broader submission to male desires. Her dismissal of riding horses therefore represents her dismissal of any desire to serve the surface-level interests of men; after all, being a "bewitching" spectacle to men defines her as a sight to be seen, not a person to be known.

Rosamond's instance of horseback riding is an analepsis, a literary device where an earlier event in the story is narrated at a later point. The reader is aware she has lost her baby before they know the series of events resulting in that loss. The first mention of the miscarriage is in chapter 56, when Mr. and Mrs. Vincy discuss their fears for their children's finances. Mrs. Vincy says, "I'm sure I felt for her being disappointed of her baby; but she got over it nicely" (352). However, the context is not explained until chapter 58, where an expository paragraph reads, "this misfortune was attributed entirely to [Rosamond] having persisted in going out on horseback one day when her husband had desired her not to do so; but it must not be supposed that she had shown temper on the occasion, or rudely told him that she would do as she liked" (359). Rosamond's riding was a secretive matter done behind her husband Lydgate's back; neither the reader nor Lydgate saw her on the horse. The fall off the horse causes her miscarriage, and it is unclear if the injury was intentional or not. Regardless, this event is tied to the might of the horse, a steed supplied by her husband's well-accomplished cousin Sir Godwin.

The image of a woman riding out of sight of her lover, or leaving with another man, teases potential infidelity.

Rosamond's betrayal is revealed later through its consequences. The implications of Rosamond on Godwin's horse "offscreen" are emphasized through a comparison with Criseyde's actions in Troilus's premonitory dream from Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. Criseyde, a Greek captured and taken to Troy, eventually falls in love with the Trojan hero Troilus. Tragically, after a deal to exchange Greek and Trojan prisoners, she is ripped from her lover and sent back home; she is courted there by Diomedes while Troilus fruitlessly waits for her return. Troilus never actually sees Criseyde with Diomedes, but he has a dream in which he

sees her lying with a boar and kissing it, interpreting that as a sign of her infidelity (Chaucer 139). His suspicions are later confirmed after seeing a brooch he gifted Criseyde on Diomedes' tunic (150). The scene where Diomedes leads Criseyde's horse away by the reins with her mounted on it finalizes her betrayal of Troilus (122). Rosamond and Criseyde both betray their lovers in an unknown event later revealed indirectly to their lovers.

Similar to Criseyde, who is never actually seen with a boar by Troilus, Rosamond is never seen on the horse by Lydgate. She keeps her riding secret from her husband until it is exposed through her miscarriage. The image of a woman riding out of sight of her lover, or leaving with another man, teases potential infidelity. In addition, the connection to the animals, whether it be boar or horse, signifies a moment of betrayal in both Eliot's and Chaucer's works. Captain Lydgate's horse and Diomedes' boar embody infidelity through the female lover's interactions with the animals; the matter is secretive and hidden behind symbolism and literary devices. Therefore, Rosamond's horse remains connected to a dominant role and masculine captain archetype instead of becoming an extension of her. Men remain the only visible horse riders.

A Man on Horseback

Fred Vincy, one of the novel's most prominent riders faces various trials to uphold his manhood and status as a worthy lover. He undergoes a hero's journey, trudging through luck- and occupation-based obstacles in order to successfully court Mary Garth. Beryl Gray tracks the arc of Fred's story through his relationship with horses, which reflects his ascent from financial strife into a comfortable future with Mary (12-15). Before his ascension, Fred invests in a horse named Diamond that he hopes to resell for profit, but it tragically lames itself at the lowest point in Fred's life, emphasizing his suffering caused by debt and doubt about his future (Eliot 152). The horse laming itself not only adds to the misfortune Fred experiences but also causes him to fall deeper into his depressive state; the horse does the opposite of lifting him up physically by putting him down mentally.

However, later on Fred becomes a savior through horses. Gray identifies that Fred's confidence on horseback increases when he helps a railroad work-

er named Tom, who had been knocked off his horse by a group of men who are against the railroad's construction. Gray analyzes the scene by mentioning that "Fred's expert horsemanship enables him to cover the retreat of the railway agents...before helping Tom onto the horse he'd himself been riding....The act of sending the boy away on the horse that had been at his own disposal prepares for the fact that Fred is about to ground himself by working for Mr. Garth" (Gray 14). In this scene, Fred charges like a cavalier to rescue Tom, "cutting right and left with his whip" (Eliot 345). Fred upholds chivalric savior attributes by bravely diving in and rescuing a helpless boy; this moment signifies the beginning of his success arc, where he can start to truly prove himself to Mary. A strong and powerful steed carries him into this incident, lifting him up and supporting his chivalric ideals. In the finale, he even "[keeps] his love of horsemanship," the mode that transported him into a successful life with Mary (Eliot 511). Horsemanship is the symbol of his lowest point and the marker of his comeback, carrying him to the end.

Fred achieves the traditional courtly happy ending through his relentless pursuit of his lover until her answer is "yes."

Mary undertakes a role similar to Penelope's in the *Odyssey*. She is patient and loyal to Fred, her Odysseus, and never strays from fidelity while he is away despite the onslaught of young suitors pursuing her. She actively waits for Fred to become the best version of himself, a commitment that requires her to sadly, sometimes even tearfully, reject potential suitors (Eliot 322). Fred's ambition and desire for success is rooted in his goal to serve Mary and be a proper husband for her. Without her to look forward to, he would be left to wander aimlessly. Mary takes on the female courtly lover role effectively, denying Fred on various occasions specifically under the pretense that he is not worthy yet, emphasizing that she will be ready for him when he is. In one such instance, Fred discovers that Mary has rejected Farebrother, explaining that she can only picture herself with Fred. Fred, awestruck, replies, "Do you really like me best, Mary? ...turning eyes full of affection on her, and trying to take her hand. 'I don't like you at all at this moment,'

[says] Mary, retreating, and putting her hands behind her. 'I only said that no mortal ever made love to me besides you. And that is no argument that a very wise man ever will,' she [ends], merrily" (358). Her denials toward Fred contain a hint of reciprocity while still declining his advances. She is loyal to Fred, but she is also dedicated to driving him to fulfill the potential she sees in him. She becomes a quest giver, calling him to the hero's journey in which he eventually executes his chivalric goals and attains vocational fulfillment. Fred achieves the traditional courtly happy ending through his relentless pursuit of his lover until her answer is "yes."

Will Ladislaw: The Steed-less Lover's Courtly Love Antics

Will Ladislaw, on the other hand, seems to operate outside of traditional courtly roles altogether, emphasized by his lack of appearance on horseback. The fact that Will does not appear on horseback in *Middlemarch*, despite the other men of his age group doing so, is an echo of Will's androgynous nature. Here, "androgynous" refers to demonstrating both masculine and feminine traits within medieval and Victorian understandings of the gender binary. "Trans, Time, and History" by Leah DeVun and Zeb Tortorici provides an overview of scholarly approaches to understanding gender queerness throughout history. The article finds that stripping the "echoes" of transness from their context, location, and time period yields inaccurate information. The process of pinpointing stamps of genderqueer identity requires a combination of imagination and historical knowledge as noted by DeVun and Tortorici:

We question how much distance really lies between historicist and imaginative approaches to the past. As Howard Chiang points out in this issue... 'researching, writing, and theorizing trans history demands robust speculation and imagination... This also might just mirror the creative ways with which subjugated historical actors have had to speculate or imagine ways of survival across time and place.' (534)

Queer medievalism can be understood as the elements of contemporary queerness found in medieval stories, but it also operates as an approach to find sliv-

ers of gender and sexuality binary disruption in these texts. The queer medievalism method will be used to analyze Will as an androgynous figure who disrupts gender norms. Through his combination of masculine- and feminine-coded attributes, Will transcends and destabilizes the chivalrous knight archetype in the medieval discourse that surrounds him. He is an "incomplete knight" because he does not have a traditional female lover and a horse, but he also displays the qualities of a courtly lover through his use of medieval romance tropes and courtly love antics.

Will's courtly love antics are well-integrated into the scholarly conversation surrounding him. Judith Johnston argues in her article "*Middlemarch*: Medieval Discourses and Will Ladislaw" that Eliot's usage of medievalisms such as courtly love make the text accessible and the story conflicts manageable for readers to understand (125). Johnston defends the dramatics of *Middlemarch* and Will's courtly love antics by discussing how they are "used in a very particular and complex way, to highlight comically the weaknesses and shortcomings of the hero" (127). In scholarly conversation with Willene Pursell, Johnston finds that the usage of courtly love in the text is a comedic way to mock Will while also revealing his personality (136-137). His way of falling in love is radically different from contemporaries like Lydgate, Fred, or Sir James; Will's emotions are heavily exaggerated to the point of melodrama. This is reminiscent of Windeatt's characterization and explanation of the function of Troilus's personality, where he writes:

Troilus is the hero of the poem, but one in whom the endeavor in venturing associated with a hero is translated by his exceptional capacity to feel. ... Troilus is a hero by virtue of being in love... [his] status as a hero of the narrative must be newly defined: in his passivity, his idealism, he is a study in a literary archetype taken to the brink of absurdity, but perhaps all the more admirable. (xxv-xxvi)

Troilus is a hero not through traditional means of strength but through feeling, which makes him similar to Will. However, the social norms of the Victorian period denote Will's emotions and approach to love as feminine. He embodies the medieval romance trope of a long, drawn-out courtship with Dorothea, which is in direct conflict with the Victorian norm of a fast-

paced pursuit and marriage of a suitor. This difference in Will's approach to romantic relationships brings on a sense of queerness of its own, further emphasizing how he is not a traditional masculine character.

However, the social norms of the Victorian period denote Will's emotions and approach to love as feminine.

An androgynous figure must be twofold, possessing one side upholding feminine ideas and another that upholds masculine ones. Will's internal conflict between these two sides is shown through Inclination and Objection, the internal dialogue he uses to assist in decision-making. The pronouns within Will's mind consist of an "I" and a "you," a defendant and a prosecutor. Within himself, Will identifies "Inclination," who champions pursuing his passions, as the "I"; this self-identification is telling of his value of his romantic impulses. "Objection" is a dismissible accuser, a "you" that he distances himself from but still retains throughout the internal argument. Objection is rationale, the disruptor of his passionate wiles; Victorian gender stereotyping would point to rationale as a masculine trait because it upholds Victorian ideals of empiricism and exactness, or the idea that there is a "correct" answer. Inclination is more aligned with emotion and love, which in Victorian times would be coded as feminine, but it is also associated with the medieval male courtly lover archetype.

One example of Inclination and Objection arguing takes place as Will debates leaving Dorothea alone or vexing Casaubon by opting to see her. The narrator describes the scene:

Objection said—

"That will be a virtual defiance of Mr. Casaubon's prohibition to visit Lowick, and Dorothea will be displeased."

"Nonsense!" argued Inclination, "it would be too monstrous for him to hinder me from going out to a pretty country church on a spring morning. And Dorothea will be glad."

"It will be clear to Mr. Casaubon that you have come either to annoy him or to see Dorothea."

"It is not true that I go to annoy him, and why

should I not go to see Dorothea? Is he to have everything to himself and be always comfortable?... I have always liked the quaintness of the church and congregation... I shall go into [the] pew." Having silenced Objection by force of unreason, Will walked to Lowick as if he had been on the way to Paradise. (Eliot 292)

Will's desire for Dorothea leads him to walk to Lowick; as a horse-less character, he must be his own steed. Windeatt notes Troilus's loyalty to Criseyde can be read as "rigidity and obsession" (xxvii). Similarly, Will's love for Dorothea is his rigidity, and opposition to the generally "malleable and flexible" nature of Will as read by Johnston (128). His love is his driving force, the deciding factor of where he travels.

The language used to describe Will as he sings his poem affirms the feminine aspects of his gender.

An androgynous figure is divisible into a father and a mother, in which a mother is a creator (Brisson 73). As Will walks on foot to Lowick Church to catch a glimpse of his beloved Dorothea, he creates a hymn from the heart about his truthful, undying love for her. The language used to describe Will as he sings his poem affirms the feminine aspects of his gender. Describing his performance, Eliot writes that "Showing his delicate throat as he sang, he looked like an incarnation of the spring whose spirit filled the air—a bright creature, abundant in uncertain promises" (293). Greek spring personifications and deities are often presented as female, so describing Will in this manner reveals his androgynous nature. Persephone is one of the most well-known Spring deities, whose story is understood in tandem with her mother, Demeter. The connection between Persephone and Demeter is most known outside of the presence of Persephone's father, Zeus; this mirrors Will's matrilineal family tree, in which the story of his mother is more relevant to the plot than of his father. Additionally, Will is defined as a "bright creature;" while this is not the only instance of a character being referred to as a creature, the genderless connotation of the word aligned with Will as spring incarnate sets him apart from traditional masculine ideas.

Will's inability to construct a traditional courtly relationship with Dorothea, in which she submits passively to his advances, further contributes to Will's non-normative characterization. His unsuccessful courting methods lead supporting characters in the text to mock him, forcing him to pursue his passions alone (Eliot 52, 237). When Will decides to leave Middlemarch to pursue work, Dorothea's status as a widow maddens him. She is "available" to an extent, as he can still have her in his life, but his chivalric ideals would never let him overstep the boundary of courting her. In the middle of one of Will and Dorothea's interactions, emotions run high. Dorothea exclaims, "I shall never forget you. I have never forgotten any one whom I once knew. My life has never been crowded, and seems not likely to be so. And I have a great deal of space for memory at Lowick, haven't I?" (336). Will gives an emotional response:

"Good God!" Will burst out passionately, rising, with his hat still in his hand, and walking away to a marble table, where he suddenly turned and leaned his back against it.... It had seemed to him as if they were like two creatures slowly turning to marble in each other's presence, while their hearts were conscious and their eyes were yearning.... It should never be true of him that in this meeting to which he had come with bitter resolution he had ended by a confession which might be interpreted into asking for her fortune. (336-337)

Dorothea does not show reciprocal longing for Will in this moment because she is unaware of her feelings, and she only recognizes them in the last arc of the book. In hopes of comforting Will, Dorothea tries to show him that he is likened to everyone else in her mind as she has room for every person in her memory. This is untrue, however; he likely takes up more space in her mind than anyone else, a fact illustrated by her desire to meet him again in Chapter 21. Will, on the other hand, displays his disappointment and frustration through his body, throwing his back against the table and describing himself and Dorothea as gorgons, feminine creatures with the ability to turn living beings to stone. Because of the way Dorothea has explicitly described him as like everyone else, he is restrained from confessing his love to her.

His hopes and dramaticisms do not bring their love to fruition but only serve to inhibit its development, and his failure to communicate becomes comical. Here he can again be related to Troilus as "[Troilus's] capacity for idealization may seem either admirably high-minded or naïve and impractical. His humble passivity may seem a reflection of gentleness and modesty, but it may appear either comically or tiresomely ineffectual" (Windeatt xxv). Troilus hides behind his idealized reality, and, either to display his own humility or as a result of his ineffectiveness, refuses to make any moves because he fears shattering this ideal. Likewise, Will hides behind his wholehearted belief that Dorothea will not reciprocate his pursuits, a belief he fell headfirst and dramatically into after only a few interactions and a great number of assumptions. Both Troilus and Will refuse to communicate their feelings genuinely with their lovers, leading to each romance's stagnation and failure.

Without a passive damsel to submit to his loving pursuits, Will's role as a courtly lover is incomplete.

Will's separation occurs in the presence of his, at the time, unreciprocated love for Dorothea, aligning with Luc Brisson's argument that "this coincidence is never achieved in human love, although it does find expression in a throbbing longing" (73). The evidence of Will's dual nature emerges in his desire for Dorothea. Johnston writes that "if Dorothea is to achieve active self-determination, she cannot be reduced to passivity again by a chivalrous hero" (135). Without a passive damsel to submit to his loving pursuits, Will's role as a courtly lover is incomplete.

Not only is Will divided, but also Will and Dorothea's relationship is split into two. Dorothea adopts the female courtly lover role in which male affection is denied by the woman. However, Dorothea does not intentionally deny Will's affection; rather, she is blind to the romantic tension between them. Unknown to Will, Casaubon is another reason that he and Dorothea are not together. Unlike in *Troilus and Criseyde*, where Troilus's companion, Pandarus, helped the two lovers come together, Casaubon serves as a force to keep Dorothea and Will apart. Casaubon comes be-

tween their relationship like a “fire-breathing dragon” that is destined to be defeated by Dorothea, the unconventional female courtly lover, instead of Will (Eliot 291). This further cements Will as an unconventional knight since he does not have a conventional courtly lover or a steed.

In addition to his deviations from romantic norms, Will is a notorious walker who defines himself as a steed rather than a rider. Beryl Gray interprets Will’s association with Pegasus in conjunction with the idea that the horses of *Middlemarch* are extensions of their riders: Will defines himself as being the winged horse instead of as a rider. She writes that “[Will], who is never seen on horseback, resists being yoked or otherwise controlled as a horse might be controlled, for he identifies himself with the mythological winged horse-god” (15). Casaubon says, “Will Ladislav is chiefly determined in his aversion to these [professional] callings... To careful reasoning of this kind he replies by calling himself Pegasus, and every form of prescribed work ‘harness’” (Eliot 52). Gray compares the powerful wings of the Pegasus to the delicate, weak wings of the moth that Casaubon represents. Additionally, Will’s definition of himself as the free-flying Pegasus rather than a horse to be yoked evokes the traditionally submissive horse, yet his refusal to identify with a trainable steed contradicts this. The Pegasus was born directly from the blood of Medusa, recalling Will’s connection to his mother and even his gender expression. Will’s self-association with Pegasus shows he does not want to be “harnessed,” but defining him as a wild horse would be a disservice to his dedication to chivalrous knighthood. Furthermore, by comparing himself to a divine figure he also emphasizes his disruption of Victorian confines of gender. As the unbridled winged-being, he is free to fly above societal boundaries through his self-identification. The added layer of the Pegasus as a deity of poetry further associates Will with love, emotion, and creation, evoking Brisson’s archetypes of androgyny in the divine. As a human, he could be a rider, but as the Pegasus, he is the steed to be ridden; his identity becomes divisible again through his unique identification with horses.

Although he does not submit to work, Will is a submissive steed in the game of love. While Dorothea “drives” him to Lowick Church, he maintains the sub-

missive nature of giving into the dominant energy of his love for her. In addition, Will does not stand in elevated positions in the text. While his contemporary male peers are often depicted on horseback, Will is never raised taller than the standing position. As an unconventional knight unlike Fred, Will does not ride a horse to pursue his love or defend his values; his heroic, violent attributes manifest through his words.

For instance, Will explodes in anger at Rosamond when his misinterpreted interaction with her nearly costs him Dorothea’s love. When Will rejected Rosamond, he held her hands and tried to let her down easy, which Dorothea witnessed accidentally when she walked in on them, scandalizing and compromising both Will and Rosamond’s reputations and intentions. Will, who vies for Dorothea and not Rosamond, is angered that his chances with Dorothea might have been sabotaged due to Rosamond’s emotions. The narrator describes him in his anger, and how “[Will] had a horrible inclination to stay and shatter Rosamond with his anger. It seemed as impossible to bear the fatality she had drawn down on him without venting his fury as it would be to a panther to bear the javelin-wound without springing and biting” (Eliot 479-480). Will is explored as a “creature” again, this time one that is wounded. In his “Monster” chapter in *Sexual Ambivalence*, Luc Brisson writes about the classical historical expectation of the misbehaving or “monstrous” androgynous person, where violence and punishment is connected with gender transformation. Brisson writes “in antiquity, the apparition of a human being possessing both sexes unleashed such terrible passion because it called into question the organization of society and the survival of the human race” (39), in which dual-sexed identities become differentiated from “humanness.” The word “inclination” also returns in the Ladislav passage, where the impulsivity of his love for Dorothea is so strong that he can rip Rosamond apart with it. He uses his words, a declaration of his love for Dorothea, as “poisoned weapons...being hurled” against Rosamond (480). He yells, “Explain! Tell a man to explain how he dropped into hell! Explain my preference! I never had a preference for her, any more than I have a preference for breathing. No other woman exists by the side of her. I would rather touch her hand if it were dead, than I would touch any other woman’s living” (480). As Will speaks, he makes his love for Dorothea tangible; this

creation of his love is directed toward Rosamond as a way to harm her. He would rather touch Dorothea's dead hands than a living woman's, which he declares right after clasping Rosamond's hands. Rosamond becomes the dragon he must ward off. With himself as his steed and his love as his weapon, he pulverizes medieval, chivalric attributes and tropes, forcefully shaping them into his own form of an unconventional knight.

Conclusion

George Eliot's utilization of horses in the chivalric context of knighthood, in addition to the Chaucerian trope of courtly love, constructs ideas of femininity, masculinity, and androgyny unique to *Middlemarch*. The characters' relationships to horseback riding all connect to a common understanding of a dominant, controlling energy, and each individual relationship exemplifies how the characters choose to express this energy. By understanding chivalric norms of masculinity and traditional gender roles, *Middlemarch* readers can better understand Will's queerness, especially in contrast with more traditional, cisgender characters like Fred and Dorothea.

Will's androgyny is never explicitly mentioned, but by analyzing the standards of chivalric tradition that both Fred and Will reside in, especially regarding their relationships with horses, readers can find that the male characters of *Middlemarch* are not equally portrayed in their masculinity. Readers consider the classical context of androgyny and Chaucer's writing of unconventional relationships in *Troilus and Criseyde*, they find that Will maintains multiple seemingly contradictory identities. Will submits to the impulses of his love while Fred dominates his, charging towards his love and through its obstacles. When viewed through binary Victorian gender roles, Will becomes feminine through his emotions and cannot maintain every facet of masculine, physically strong knightliness. Still, he finds power in his words, whether in soft hymns to Dorothea or raging weapons thrown at Rosamond. The unconventional, or queer, manifestations of Will's love and gender contribute to the idea that he is an androgynous disruptor of the gender binary in *Middlemarch*.



Author's Note

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