

Many a classicist turns to George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* as a recreational read, perhaps to renew one’s own idealization of Greek and Roman classics through the aspirations of Dorothea Brooke, or to revisit a monitory tale about how *not* to do classics in the disturbing anti-heroic portrait of Dorothea’s husband Edward Casaubon. By self-categorizing her novel a “home epic,” Eliot’s narrator ventures an authorial conceit that explicitly links her narrative project with the authority of classical antiquity (*MM* Finale:832). But exaggerating the “epic” factor in the home epic equation is a tantalizing misreading. Eliot does intend for us to close *Middlemarch* with a classical exemplar burned in our memories, but this exemplar should be found in the work of Plutarch and Xenophon, rather than in the exalted calamities of epic or tragic ancient genres.

In her implicit choice of literary influences, Eliot embeds classical inspiration for everyday ethics in her dual romance-plot structure. In complement to the “Romantic” Dorothea, we meet a prosaic Mary Garth – whose unexceptional life choices are informed by study in the classics, and whose renunciation of worldly gain matches Dorothea’s. I assert that Eliot’s masterpiece amounts to, in part, a *Parallel Lives* of the prototypical marriageable woman of Middlemarch, representative of middle-class British society at large. In effect, Eliot extends Plutarch’s ancient work with two modern women’s lives. Following the thematic counterpoint intrinsic to Plutarch’s biographical design, then, we find an ancient Greek *ethos* paired against Roman *virtus* and *labor*.

Overall, Eliot’s message seems to be that making worthy ethical choices based on classical erudition is perpetuated by the female middle-class. However, the contemporary feminist reader is likely to see a bitter compromise in the nineteenth-century female amateur of classical letters. Eliot questions patriarchy in showing how women can enter a strictly male province of knowledge; and yet, the unforgiving society she faithfully depicts continues to deny women a meaningful sense of authorship or agency in the constructive use of that classical knowledge. We may justifiably ask whether Mary Ann Evans’ authoring novels under the name of George Eliot takes advantage of an exceptional privilege unavailable to her two heroines.