Sexualities in Victorian Britain

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Beginning in the 1830s, it was possible for British writers to represent the middle class as the only class. Henry Brougham famously stated that “by the people . . . I mean the middle classes, the wealth and intelligence of the country, the glory of the British name” (qtd. in Briggs, “Language” 11). With a deftly deployed tautology, Sarah Ellis in 1838 defends her decision to write about “the female population of Great Britain” (16) by writing only about the middle class:

In order to speak with precision of the characteristics of any class of people, it is necessary to confine our attention as much as possible to that portion of the class where such characteristics are most prominent; and, avoiding the two extremes where circumstances not peculiar to that class are supposed to operate, to take the middle or intervening portion as a specimen of the whole. (18)

“Class of people” in this passage refers, ostensibly, to “the female population,” but by denominating them a “class” Ellis implicitly equates all women with one particular social class. Moreover, in order to assert that the characteristics of the women of England are “most prominent” among the middle classes, Ellis has already, tautologically, determined that middle-class characteristics are what is typically British.

Although at this date the middle class is not a numerical majority of Britain’s population, Ellis can make it seem so:

[W]hen we consider the number, the influence, and the respectability of that portion of the inhabitants who are, directly, or indirectly, connected with our trade and merchandise, it does indeed appear to constitute the mass of English society, and may lastly be considered as exhibiting the most striking and unequivocal proofs of what are the peculiar characteristics of the people of England. (18)
“Respectability,” that prototypically middle-class virtue, is slipped in here among other more clearly objective measures of hegemony (influence and number) to suggest that her bias toward the middle class is merely a matter of numbers. She enlarges the middle class by appropriating to it a term usually reserved for the working classes, “mass.” Ellis goes on to explain why neither the aristocracy nor the “indigent and most laborious” are typical of the British, because they lack what she has already decided is “typical.” She writes that we cannot “with propriety look for those strong features of nationality” among the poor, because “the urgency of mere physical wants” makes England’s working class much like those in other countries. Although she uses “propriety” here to mean “appropriateness,” the word’s connotations of “properness” mean that, again, a middle-class virtue masquerades as an impartial rule of observation. Looking with propriety, Ellis will only see propriety, and from here on, she essentially erases the upper and lower classes.

Adam Bede and The Mill on the Floss work in much the same way. Not only generalizing mid-Victorian middle-class qualities to other classes but also projecting them backward in time, Eliot’s early novels universalize the British middle class and, in so doing, align themselves with other efforts to consolidate middle-class hegemony in the nineteenth century. Eliot, having internalized middle-class norms, universalizes the middle class by making its peculiar characteristics appear natural, generically human ones, and she naturalizes those characteristics, much as Ellis does, by naturalizing Victorian middle-class womanhood as womanhood itself. When she herself wants to make more money from the publication of one of her novels, she relabels her class aspirations as the natural sympathy of a selfless Victorian woman: “I may say without cant—since I am in a position of anxiety for others as well as myself—that it is my duty to seek not less than the highest reasonable advantage from my work” (Letters 3: 219; 30 Nov. 1859). In constructing her heroines as in writing about money, Eliot represents partisanship for the middle class as supposedly classless domesticity and morality, a morality specifically identified with woman. For Eliot, whose career took her from the bottom of the middle class to the top, from estate manager’s daughter to wealthy Londoner with her own carriage and pair, middle-class life encompasses all the possibilities of life itself, and her novels make class and gender work together to consolidate middle-class hegemony.

In undertaking to read Eliot’s fiction in this way, I am taking part in a recent widespread feminist endeavor to articulate the relation of gender to class. In 1984 Cora Kaplan argued that class and sexual difference “reciprocally constitute[e] each other” and that “to understand how gender and class . . . are articulated together transforms our analysis of them” (148). Among others, Mary Poovey and Nancy Armstrong have been prominent in beginning to reveal what that reciprocal constitution of class and gender might mean in nineteenth-century Britain. Of the Victorian separation of spheres into the highly artificial constructs of public, political, marketplace male and domesticated, moralizing female, Poovey writes: “de-
ployments of the domestic ideal helped depoliticize class relations at midcentury, partly by translating class difference into psychological or moral difference" (9). She adds that the "rhetorical separation of spheres and the image of domesticated, feminized morality were crucial to the consolidation of bourgeois power" (10). Representing the constructed and volatile divisions of social class through, and as, the immutable division of supposedly natural sexual difference enables the representation of the middle class as eternal, not arriviste, and the equation of its particular values with the universally human.

Like Poovey, Armstrong sees the emphasis of nineteenth-century fiction on individual psychology as a displacement of class politics: "over time the novel produced a language of increasing psychological complexity for understanding individual behavior...as fiction progressively uncovered the 'depths' of individual identity, a complex system of political signs was displaced" (253). In Armstrong's view, the middle class, to make itself appear eternal and universal, represented its version of the self as a classless subjectivity that would appear not constructed but "natural, [and it] also removed subjective experience and sexual practices from their place in history" (9). For Armstrong it is the domestic, psychologically profound, sexual female self whose construction as natural and universal is the key to middle-class ascendency, and that is where Dinah's blush and Maggie's arm come in.

Armstrong's study, focusing as it does on fiction from the eighteenth century through the 1840s, can only hint at the particular ways in which the privatizing and psychologizing of the female self come to represent middle-class ascendency in the novels of the prosperous mid- and late-Victorian period. Neither the pattern she traces in novels of the 1840s, in which she finds that the replacement of a monstrous, sexual woman by a domesticated one represents the taming of the threatening working classes, nor her oblique representation of later Victorian fiction through Shirley and Darwin, where Armstrong sees the middle-class woman civilizing aggressive males, quite fits Eliot's novels of 1859 and 1860. Although Hetty and Maggie are lower class (in Maggie's case, only relatively so) and intensely sexual women, and although both die, I will argue that the working class, like the aristocracy, is not so much expelled in these later novels as included in a vision of all-comprehending middle-class ascendency. Moreover, I will argue that the sexual woman—in the case of The Mill on the Floss a threateningly sexual woman—and the civilizing middle-class woman are one. Dinah becomes a signifier of domesticity only when she acquires self-conscious sexuality; Maggie signifies middle-class values, paradoxically, by way of her excessive sexuality.

Unlike most of the novels on which Armstrong focuses (the exception is Wuthering Heights), both these novels are set in the past, demonstrating that middle-class habits and values are present not only in all levels of British society but also at all times. Armstrong argues that representations of the middle-class female self predate the economic grounding of that self by at least a hundred years, because they begin in the eighteenth century. Eliot's retrospective novels complement the project Armstrong argues for in the earlier novels: written at a time when that
middle-class female self is a social reality as well as a fictive construct, Eliot's novels authoritatively project backward an actual condition that Armstrong claims earlier novels could only imagine.

I

Adam Bede closes with a tableau, dated 1807, striking for its phantasmic representation of a Victorian middle-class family long before that social form became dominant and in the kind of rural location where it took root the slowest. Adam, formerly a wage-earning artisan, has taken over Jonathan Burge's carpentry business and his substantial house, and he also earns a salary managing the Donnithornes' woods. Adam and Dinah live with their two children, and Uncle Seth is a familiar visitor. Almost certainly their household includes at least one servant; in Burge's day a servant worked there, and earlier Adam has assured his mother that they can afford one. Seven years after the events recounted in the last chapter, Dinah's face has grown "plumper" (Adam's term) "to correspond to her more matronly figure" (583, 581). Entirely domesticated, Dinah has ceased preaching in public, because of a methodist decree against female preachers, with which Adam (explicitly) and she (tacitly) agree. She no longer works in the cotton-mill nor, it seems, does productive home agricultural work like Mrs. Poyser, for Dinah's house is not a farm. We learn that Hetty, who never left the agricultural working class, has died while returning from her seven years' transportation. The family party is waiting for Adam to return from greeting Arthur Donnithorne, who has come home "shattered" by fever (582) from his own voluntary exile. Hetty gone and Arthur diminished, this prosperous nuclear family fills the picture frame of Eliot's purportedly realist portrait of rural life, having taken up all the space previously occupied by the "extremes" (Ellis's term) of upper and lower classes.

With this sweet family picture of what Philip Fisher calls "the new center of power" (65), the novel presents a proleptic image of the middle-class family triumphant. Although Adam's home is still, in the old way, his workplace, the narrative's focus on a moment when he returns home to his family creates the illusion of a Victorian separation of home and work.1 By the standards not of 1807 but of 1859, Dinah at home, straining her eyes to catch sight of her entrepreneurial husband, is the chief signifier of what will be the Victorian middle class, at least its bottom rung. Sarah Ellis defines her middle-class readership (and subject) as women in households supported by "trade and manufactures." Adam's ambitious carpentry business, in which he invests and builds new devices to market, is a form of manufacture, even if it is not industrialized and would not be for the remainder of the nineteenth century. Joan Burstyn defines the middle class as households with over £100 of annual income, and since Adam earned a guinea a week superintending the Donnithornes' woods when he started the job in 1799, he may well earn something like £100 annually now. Ellis further defines the middle-class household as "restricted to the services of from one to four domestics" (24), very
likely the case in the Bedes’ household. That household, then, is a forerunner of the Victorian middle-class home, a sentimentalized image projected backward from Eliot’s day onto Adam’s.

After the publication of *Adam Bede* Eliot received a letter of praise from Jane Carlyle. Of this letter Eliot writes to John Blackwood that “I reckon it among my best triumphs that she found herself ‘in charity with the whole human race’ when she laid the book down.” She adds: “Will you tell her that the sort of effect she declares herself to have felt from ‘Adam Bede’ is just what I desire to produce—gentle thoughts and happy remembrances” (*Letters* 3: 23–24, 24 Feb. 1859). As Mary Jean Corbett points out, citing Carlyle’s letter and similar comments, this is a remarkable response to a novel that includes cross-class seduction, infanticide, and so much emotional suffering. Middle-class readers like Carlyle loved the nostalgic, pastoral mood of the novel and its workers ennobled through suffering who make the reader from another class feel “that we are all alike—that the human heart is one” (E. S. Dallas, qtd. in Corbett 292). The cumulative effect of such goodwill is, I would argue, concentrated onto the final tableau and the ideological program that becomes explicit only there: the idyllic picture of Adam and Dinah’s domesticity filling the frame, all disharmonious elements—that is, those who belong to other classes—expunged or pushed to the margins. For the middle-class reader and writer alike, the epilogue would represent the ascendency, not of something narrowly defined and marked as one class rather than another, but of middle-class values masquerading as universal values. Carlyle’s phrase, “in charity with the whole human race,” makes this equation with particular effectiveness; the term with which she denotes the transcendence of class boundaries, “charity,” names a leisure activity of middle-class females. The middle-class family becomes the norm, and that makes the middle-class reader “happy.”

This “ideologically induced Victorian blindness to the operation of class dynamics” (Corbett 292) is, paradoxically, achieved through a plot that details the subtle gradations of class difference and class mobility with extraordinary care. Readings like Carlyle’s and Dallas’s, as Corbett points out, reflect a vision of the novel in which Eliot “stabilizes [the] historical past,” preferring “static order” to “the process of historical change” (288), a vision shared by as recent a reader as Sally Shuttleworth. The process leading to the static vision of the epilogue, however, involves an extraordinarily complex negotiation of historical change. And even if the ending is itself static, it represents a world very changed from that of the opening. Poised between the old and new, the novel, like *The Mill on the Floss*, traces the process of transition even as it compresses that transition by locating it backward in time.

How does the novel arrive at its final tableau? Ostensibly, Adam’s deliberate and clearly marked economic rise determines his family’s status. He starts out a wage-earning carpenter living in his parents’ house, earns extra money by his own carpentry business, gets promoted to manager of the Donnithorpes’ woods, and eventually buys out his former employer’s business and establishment. He is a self-made man, just as the middle class as a whole manufactured and traded itself into
existence. And yet his self-construction is represented in a peculiar sort of harmony with the feudal order of the countryside, an order that is so old as to seem natural, like the hereditary "ranks" Eliot celebrates in "The Natural History of German Life." F. M. L. Thompson demonstrates that the building trades were not susceptible to mechanization and remained very little changed over the course of the nineteenth century while industrialization was transforming such industries as cloth or iron manufacturing (45-46). 

**Adam Bede**, in thus representing middle-class aspiration and the work ethic through a static trade, fosters the view that the middle class was always there and associates the inclusive middle class with an unthreatening form of work. Carpentry involves none of the dangerous factories and rebellious factory operatives that generate class conflict in industrial novels such as Gaskell's *Mary Barton*.

The novel in other ways encourages the view that Adam's rise threatens no one by naturalizing the social ranks of the neighborhood. Daniel Cottom points out that the novel associates Arthur and his family with classical divinities (Arthur is Jupiter, or Eros to Hetty's Psyche; Mrs. Irwine is Ceres), thus suggesting that their rank is timeless, even though, as Cottom points out, Eliot also exposes the constructedness of their class by deriving these associations from the literatures of Arthur's gentlemanly education (87). Similarly, to extend Cottom's line of argument, in the very first scene Adam speaks admiringly of "Arkwright's mills" and other products and agencies of modern industry, but he does so while "carving a shield in the center of a wooden mantelpiece" (49; see Shuttleworth 24). This work signifies both his superior skills and his desire to uphold, to refresh and renew, the aristocracy whose coats of arms are a bit faded; in the next chapter the weatherbeaten sign at the Donnithorne Arms inn is illegible. Adam is extremely proud of Arthur's high regard for him, and he owes his first major rise in status to Arthur's patronage. This rise is elaborately staged at Arthur's birthday feast as Adam's ascent from the ordinary tables at ground level to the "large tenants' " tables on the second story, an ascent physically contained within the structure of aristocratic dominance.

Part of the happy feeling at the end of the novel comes from this conciliatory representation of Adam's rise. The aristocracy is not overturned, merely trivialized or diminished, as Cottom argues. Middle-class ascendancy must be made to seem gradual and organic, not revolutionary; otherwise it would invite its own overthrow. It occurs to no one, for example, that Arthur might give away the Donnithorne estate in penance or in recompense for his violation of Hetty and her family. He ends the novel still in control of the estates that Adam still manages for him, even if he is also a much diminished presence. That class structure remains as it was makes middle-class ascendancy, endorsed by the class it supersedes, all the more secure. In this regard Eliot's novel almost completely covers up its own contradictoriness about the relation of class to nature. On one side, the view that rank is natural and timeless (the view crystallized in the essay on Riehl, but embodied also in the portrayal of Loamshire) would suggest that members of the peasantry or artisan classes, such as Adam, have no business ascending into the
middle class, and that the middle class is as stable as any other. On the other, the middle class is made to seem equivalent to “nature,” to human life itself, and thus to be the most or even the only “natural rank,” thus violating the boundary that the first sense of “natural rank” would seem to draw around the middle class. Adam’s rise is made to reconcile even while it exposes these contradictions, to accrue by sleight of hand the authority of opposing senses of “natural rank.”

Adam’s rise and Arthur’s decline are naturalized not only by being incorporated into the more apparently natural old rural order, but also through gender. Arthur’s aristocratic assumption that he can always pay for damage to a lower-class person’s life—the mental safety net he creates for his guilt about seducing Hetty—is refuted by Adam, who insists on confronting Arthur “man and man” (354). Through this refusal to let Arthur pay, the novel deprives him of his class superiority. Says Adam, “I don’t forget what’s owing to you as a gentleman; but in this thing we’re man and man, and I can’t give up.” “Man and man” means that their shared gender is more important than their class difference, which is to say that shared gender supersedes and neutralizes class difference. For Adam at that moment, there is no class, only gender—two men fighting over a woman. If only “men” (and women) now populate a world undivided by other social categories, and if Adam is entitled to create the moral definition of “man,” then, as in the epilogue, Adam’s middle-class values, such as hard work and chastity, have been naturalized as human values.

Adam’s status is naturalized in these ways, but still his career includes a change in class that calls attention to class itself. To construct the naturalness and universality of the middle-class family in a way that does away with class markers altogether, the novel turns to the career of Dinah. Armstrong, Davidoff and Hall, and others have argued that Victorian wives’ most important job was to act as signifiers of their husbands’ status, and this is true of Dinah as well, in her achievement of something that looks like middle-class status, in her natural classlessness, and in her skill at merging these two characteristics.

From the start Dinah’s class position is less distinct than Adam’s, and for reasons directly attributable to her gender. Whereas Adam’s status is determined by his work and changes sequentially, Dinah occupies two different niches at the same time, one determined by family, one by work, as the following exchange early in the novel makes clear:

“Poyser wouldn’t like to hear as his wife’s niece was treated any ways disrespectful. . . . Seth’s looking rether too high, I should think,” said Mr. Casson. “This woman’s kin wouldn’t like her to demean herself to a common carpenter.”

[Wiry Ben says in response] “what’s folks’s kin got to do wi’it?—Not a chip. . . . This Dinah Morris, th’ tell me, ‘s as poor as iver she was—works at a mill, an’s much ado to keep hersen. A strappin’ young carpenter as is ready-made Methody, like Seth, wouldn’a be a bad match for her.” (65–66)

By family a member of the old agricultural middle ranks, but by her own exertions a mill-worker, Dinah occupies two stations.
This status ambiguity corresponds interestingly to Sarah Ellis’s account of women’s class position, or rather their lack of any certain one. In a world in which the boundaries of rank are becoming less and less clear, because wealth is now as important a determinant of status as birth, she warns her readers that in their dependency on unstable commercial fortunes, they may suddenly be “compelled to mingle with the laborious poor.” Therefore she recommends “a system of conduct that would enable all women to sink gracefully...into a lower grade of society” (25). All women, Ellis argues, because of their special susceptibility to status changes, should know how to work with their hands and how to perform the moral work of sympathy, which are two of Dinah’s cross-class specialties.

For indeed Dinah is made to represent values that cross all class boundaries. As Cottom writes, “Dinah possesses a gentility...entirely superior to the misleading distinctions of social rank” (88). But it is especially Dinah’s spirituality that carries her across class lines. As a preacher, she can go anywhere and speak as an equal to anyone, from the poorest laborer to the Rev. Irwine (see Beer 63). Says Mrs. Poyser, “You look like the statty o’ the outside o’ Treddles’on church, a-starin’ and a-smilin’ whether it’s fair weather or foul” (124). Lisbeth Bede, when Dinah appears unexpectedly, takes Dinah for a “spirit,” perhaps an “angel” (153–54). “Ye’ve got a’most the face o’ one as is a-sittin’ on the grave i’ Adam’s new Bible.” Elsewhere the novel associates Dinah with Mary and with St. Catherine. Dinah herself argues for transcendent values; in response to Lisbeth’s idea that people at Snowfield differ from those at Hayslope, Dinah says, anticipating responses to the novel like those of Jane Carlyle and E. S. Dallas, “the heart of man is the same everywhere” (157). What Dinah calls divine inspiration, her angelic ability to say just what suffering people need to hear, the novel naturalizes as her human goodness, her womanly tact. Her class positions could be said to cancel each other out and to be superseded by her spiritually elevated woman’s nature.

Although Dinah works in a cotton-mill (probably a spinning mill) as well as preaches, it is worth noting that the narrative, which lingers at Adam’s workplace and dwells lovingly, too, on the hand spinning that still goes on at the Pysers’, never details that determinant of Dinah’s lower and more distinct class position. Factory spinning, in contrast to the unmodernizable building trades, is part of the threatening modernity from which Eliot seeks to protect her idealized image of the middle class. In any case, by the end of the novel Dinah’s social mobility has been contained. She no longer either preaches or works in a factory, and she appears at the end as matronly wife and mother. Plenty of married women and mothers continued to work in the mills; in Dinah’s case, owing to her new class status, marriage excludes such work.

Having simply erased Dinah’s work in the mill, the novel carefully delineates the course of Dinah’s progress from preacher to domestic woman, those of her roles that are more compatible with each other. At the Pysers’, the children “had managed to convert Dinah the preacher, before whom a circle of rough men had often trembled a little, into a convenient household slave” (533), and during her stay with them Dinah, who was already an expert housekeeper when she visited
Lisbeth Bede early in the novel, “had made great advances in household cleverness” (534). Among her last public appearances—significantly, narrated by Seth to Adam at the moment when Adam has decided to marry her—is an episode in which her preaching serves chiefly a domestic function. Seth describes how a “naughty” little boy is silenced and stilled by the sound of Dinah’s voice,

“and presently he run away from ’s mother and went up to Dinah, and pulled at her, like a little dog, for her to take notice of him. So Dinah lifted him up and held th’ lad on her lap, while she went on speaking; and he was as good as could be till he went t’ sleep—and the mother cried to see him.” (547–48)

Dinah’s cross-class natural womanliness has been captured into the service of middle-class values—the angel lives on in the matron—but, importantly, without being marked as such. Because the domesticity of the epilogue must appear natural and normal, not marked as middle-class, the novel creates in Dinah a deliberately cross-class or classless figure to serve as its presiding genius. As a wife, she marks Adam’s success as also transcending class; his own rise may be clearly middle-class, but marriage to her allows the novel to claim universality for both of them.

The novel also naturalizes middle-class values by replacing class hierarchy with gender hierarchy, in a way that Armstrong, Poovey, and others have taught us to be alert to. Arthur’s birthday party represents a ritual mixing of classes that serves to confirm class boundaries. While Arthur entertains his tenants and workers with food and drink, they provide the entertainment of spectacle for him and his friends and relatives. In this picturesque, nostalgic episode, rank is maintained through the placing of tables and the degree of Arthur’s attentions. Adam’s nearly feudal deference toward Arthur at this point in the novel helps reinforce this sense that class boundaries are immutable and appropriate. Once Arthur has been discredited for seducing Hetty, however, and Adam and Arthur have become “man and man,” the novel shifts its focus to hierarchy in other locations.

Dinah and Adam have never been differentiated along class lines. The conversation between Mr. Casson and Wiry Ben about Dinah’s ambiguous class position, both higher and lower than Seth Bede, covers her status relative to Adam as well, and the novel in any case never dwells on the subject. Toward the end of the novel appears a little scene between Adam and Dinah that does place them in a hierarchy, but a hierarchy of gender, not of class. By now transformed from angelic preacher to domestic woman, Dinah is a woman self-consciously in love, not the neutral friend Adam takes her for. Dinah is visiting Lisbeth Bede prior to leaving Hayslope, and the narrative humiliatedly and sentimentally dwells upon Dinah’s obsession with housework:

if you had ever lived in Mrs. Poyser’s household, you would know how the duster behaved in Dinah’s hand—how it went into every small corner, and on every ledge in end and exit sight, how it went again and again round every bar of the chairs, and every leg, and under and over everything that lay on the table, till it came to Adam’s
papers and rulers, and the open desk near them. Dinah dusted up to the very edge of these, and then hesitated, looking at them with a longing but timid eye. It was painful to see how much dust there was among them. (535)

Who could say whether her strongest emotions are for Adam or for dusting? Desi-
sire and domestic servitude are one.

Adam catches her pathetic struggle between fear of disturbing his things and eagerness to dust, and offers his help:

“Come then,” said Adam, looking at her affectionately, “I’ll help you move the things, and put ‘em back again, and then they can’t be wrong. You’re getting to be your aunt’s own niece, I see, for particularness.”

They began their little task together, but Dinah had not recovered herself sufficiently to think of any remark. . . . He wanted her to look at him, and be as pleased as he was himself with doing this bit of playful work. But Dinah would not look at him. (536)

For Adam, who does manly work with his head and hands, dusting is a “playful bit of work,” but it is Dinah’s vocation, at least her only remaining one. The scene exaggerates the distance between them as male and female, in contrast to earlier representations of them as more or less equals. As at Arthur’s party, the carnival aspect of the scene, the temporary overturning of hierarchy, in effect confirms it, but here it is gender rather than class hierarchy. Adam’s participation in cleaning, because it is only play, points up how entirely separate his sphere is now from hers.

The harvest supper at the end of the novel revises the class hierarchy of Arthur’s birthday party, at which rank is maintained through the placing of tables and the degree of Arthur’s attention. The Poyzers put on their annual roast-beef feast for their workers, just as Arthur annually invites his tenants to eat with him. And again, the mingling of classes accentuates their difference. Mr. Poyser presides in the place of Arthur, and the scene at first appears simply to replicate relations between the gentry and the lower classes in terms of the relations between the middle and lower classes, so as, like the epilogue, to dramatize the subtle displacement of Arthur’s class. But there are important differences of another kind.

At Arthur’s party the sexes mingle; women (including Hetty) sit at the tables in the upper hall as well as below; what is marked is class distinction. At the harvest supper, gender categories are just as marked as class. The feast is only for the men, excluding Nancy and Molly, and the women serve. The condescending description of the festivities emphasizes the crude, rowdy masculinity of the working men. Moreover, the scene ends with a very peculiar and unresolved battle of the sexes between Bartle Massey—the novel’s personification of misogyny—and Mrs. Poyser, over the relative intelligence and merits of men and women.

“Ah!” said Bartle, sneeringly, “the women are quick enough—they’re quick enough. They know the rights of a story before they hear it, and can tell a man what his thoughts are before he knows ’em himself.”

“Like enough,” said Mrs. Poyser; “for the men are mostly so slow, their thoughts
overrun 'em, an' they can only catch 'em by the tail. . . . However, I'm not denyin' the women are foolish: God Almighty made 'em to match the men."

"Match!" said Bartle; "ay, as vinegar matches one's teeth." (568-69)

The debate continues for a few more exchanges, with other participants intervening. Mrs. Poyser is preparing yet one more rejoinder, however, when her voice is simply drowned out by the din of the working men drunkenly singing. An ellipsis marks the interruption after Mrs. Poyser's last words. The debate is unended, terminated only by masculine force.

The lack of resolution, as well as the abstract terms in which it is conducted ("men" and "women," not particular individuals), makes this confrontation archetypal, as if it were part of a debate going on beyond the confines of the novel and beginning and ending nowhere. This curious exchange, which has no plot function, typifies the novel's shift of emphasis from class to gender hierarchy. Adam's conflict with Arthur over Hetty stems from class differences, yet when he knocks Arthur unconscious, Adam insists that he does it simply as a man. Class is not allowed to be the source of violence, in this novel that produces in its readers "gentle thoughts and happy remembrances," but gender is. Apparently, gentle thoughts are not compatible with working-class resentment, but they are compatible with, and perhaps require, male violence toward women, which underwrites the status quo.

The debate between Mrs. Poyser and Bartle Massey also returns to an earlier scene of Mrs. Poyser's verbal aggressiveness and revises it so as again to emphasize the substitution of gender for class. Although the narrator seems generally to approve of Mrs. Poyser's "hav[ing] her say out" (393) against the despicable Squire, her revolutionary outburst also creates some anxiety, since it may lead to the Poyser's eviction and an unsettling of the old order. She threatens the Squire as an economic subordinate as well as a woman; her authority for speaking rests on the fact that, as dairywoman, she "make[s] one quarter o' the rent, and save[s] th' other quarter" (394). At the harvest supper, Mrs. Poyser confronts Bartle strictly as a woman, since class difference is not an issue between them. Whereas she could be said to win the confrontation with the Squire, the violence that cuts off her debate with Bartle would seem to vanquish her absolutely, because it is physical, and as a woman she is not physically strong. What seems a matter of anxiously and fruitfully complex negotiation earlier in the novel becomes a simple matter of male dominance at the end.

The shouting down of Mrs. Poyser makes a rather unhappy prelude to Dinah's wedding, which follows swiftly. The final scene, with Dinah as wife silenced and contained within the home, suggests how the apparent simplicity of natural gender hierarchy displaces the disturbing arbitrariness of class hierarchy. That the eccentric painfulness of the Poyser-Massey exchange, with its concluding ellipsis, remains a loose end in the novel reminds readers of the cost, in female comfort, of that displacement.

Silenced though they may be, neither Dinah nor Mrs. Poyser is expelled from
the world of the novel; both are lovingly contained within it. The harvest supper chapter ends not with the violent cutting off of Mrs. Poyser’s speech but with Adam’s affectionate defense of her to Bartle. Co-optation and inclusion—even of “a terrible woman!—made of needles” (570)—seems more desirable than expulsion. Hetty, however, is excised from the novel’s safe conclusion, and her crime of infanticide surely qualifies her as monstrous. Unlike Mrs. Poyser and Dinah, too, she never ceases to be a figure for both femaleness and class subordination, never becomes simply a woman. Hers is distinctively a woman’s crime, but she commits it not just as a woman but as a working woman who is too class-proud to consider going to the poorhouse. Like Dinah’s, Hetty’s class position is ambiguous. She is a farm worker by occupation, but higher up by family situation, so that her ambition to rise—in terms of occupational status—by becoming a lady’s maid is viewed by her uncle as lowering her status. And like Dinah too she is represented as transcending her class position, even if strictly through her looks. At Arthur’s party the upper-class women comment on the beauty which it is “a pity” to see “thrown away on the farmers, when it’s wanted so terribly among the good families without fortune!” (319). Nonetheless, Hetty’s love of Arthur is always explicitly mingled with her desire for luxury and her hope that he will make her a “grand lady” (196), and this insistent classing of her desire is part of what makes her a culpable and therefore expendable character (see Clayton 41). She cannot—unlike Dinah, Mrs. Poyser, and, as we will see, Maggie—be completely naturalized as woman, and that means she cannot be completely incorporated within the universalizing middle-class ideal.

Hetty’s sexuality, much more openly expressed than Dinah’s, is part of her representation as working class. Her uncontrolled desires distinguish her from the angelic Dinah, part of whose characterization as class-transcendent is her complete lack of self-consciousness about herself as a sexual body. Yet here the novel nearly founders on a paradox. Because the novel’s strategy for universalizing middle-class values depends on equating class transcendence with angelic transcendence, Dinah must not be sexual; and yet to marry Adam so as to become the signifier of his rising status, Dinah must become sexualized over the course of the novel. The novel must construct for her a sexuality that can appear as classless as her asexuality once did. Indeed, the narrative is particularly emphatic on the point that Dinah’s self-conscious desire for Adam predates his for her by many months. Moreover, Dinah must also acquire self-consciousness and have desires for herself, the hallmark of bourgeois individualism (in “The Natural History of German Life” the peasantry contains no individuals, only types; individuality is the hallmark of the middle class), even while she remains aloof from any particular class, so that she can represent simultaneously middle-class ideology and classlessness. Dinah says that to let herself love Adam would be to risk becoming a “lover of self” (553), and this she resists, seeing an opposition between selfishly loving Adam and continuing her selfless ministry. How does the novel manage to represent her as having a self and being selfless; how can it show her as sexual and angelic at the same time?
Dinah is sexualized in the most ethereal way. Whereas Hetty's introduction includes ample, even fetishistic descriptions of her dimpled body and curling hair, Dinah's sexualization is restricted to blushing. Descriptions of her body and hair stress her pallor, refinement, and purity. Although Dinah is far from unerotic in early scenes, the emphasis on her lack of bodily self-consciousness seems to guarantee her sexlessness; the novel tends to link sexuality with self-concern. The first sign of her erotic interest in Adam is "a faint blush ... which deepened as she wondered at it" (162), a blush that links unaccustomed self-consciousness with sexual awareness. The dusting scene discussed above begins with Dinah hearing Adam's voice and feeling as if she had "put her hands unawares on a vibrating chord; she was shaken with an intense thrill ... then she knew her cheeks were glowing" (535). She continues to blush and tremble in subsequent scenes and in Lisbeth's astute description of her at breakfast with Adam. Perhaps on the model of Milton's Raphael (who blushes "Celestial rosy red" [8.619] while describing angelic sex to Adam in Paradise Lost), blushing is the way Dinah's sexuality is made compatible with her transcendence. Lisbeth initiates her attempt to convince the dense Adam of Dinah's love by comparing her to the picture of an angel Adam's Bible is opened to (543). Moreover, Dinah's love for Adam is repeatedly characterized as natural; it is like the turning of the seasons, like water, like sunshine (545-46). Just as Dinah is converted from a particularly if ambiguously classed woman into "woman," to represent her sexuality as divine or as part of nature is to represent her as annihilating class boundaries. Thus the novel deftly conceals its suturing of contradictory claims about Dinah, just as it nearly conceals its suturing of the contradictory claims that both class stratification and the expansion of the middle class are natural. When she marries Adam and gets plump, Dinah is simultaneously a bourgeois sexual self and a selfless angel.

II

Whereas in Adam Bede the angelic heroine's sexuality poses a potential problem for the narrative project to represent middle-class values as class-transcendent ones, The Mill on the Floss, governed by the same ideological program, turns the heroine's trembling, vibrating sexuality into the chief source of her identification as simultaneously middle class and class-transcendent. The close association between sexuality and nature, like the definition of woman as a natural category, makes Maggie's sexuality—which might seem to be as "coarse" and uncontrolled as Hetty's, or as any of the female monsters in Armstrong's novels of the 1840s—into the marker of her cross-class womanliness.

The Mill on the Floss is set in a time of transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy. The novel traces the decline of Mr. Tulliver's Dorlcote Mill—with its picturesque buildings, its long history of operation by one family, its close ties to agriculture, and its small, quasi-familial work force—and the complementary rise of the trading concern Guest and Co., with its bustling scenes of wharfside
business and its vast distance between rich employer and depersonalized employees. This shift in economic power marks the passing of an apparently timeless, pre-industrial social formation, a distant precursor of the Victorian middle class, and its replacement by a newer middle class that would have been more recognizable to Eliot's contemporaries.

By the same sleight of hand with which she projects the Victorian middle class backward onto rural 1807 in *Adam Bede*, Eliot in this novel, set in the 1820s and 1830s, manages to make the transition from a pre-industrial to a mercantile economy stand in for the transition to Victorian industrialism in its prime. Guest and Co. is primarily a trading concern, which identifies it as part of late eighteenth-century mercantilism. Its wharves are the busiest and most extensive in St. Ogg's, and yet the ancient town's trading economy is described in nostalgic terms. The products traded are primarily agricultural, not manufactured: "fir-planks . . . oil-bearing seed, [and] coal" come in (11); "inland products . . . cheese and soft fleeces" (127) go out. Nonetheless, some of the goods Guest and Co. trades, some of its ancillary enterprises, and above all the lifestyle of its owners make it simultaneously high Victorian. Guest and Co. owns, in addition to its nostalgically described wharves and sailing ships, a linseed oil mill, which typifies its position on a borderline of economic history. Linseed oil is an agricultural product (derived from "oil-bearing seed"), and its mill would seem akin to rustic Dorlcote Mill, yet linseed oil is used in modern industry (e.g., to waterproof the towers of steam-powered factories) and in the manufacture of paint and ink. Moreover, Guest and Co. has apparently modernized its mill, "the largest" in St. Ogg's (378) and much newer than Dorlcote Mill (259), by powering it with steam. (Later, Wakem and Guest compete for the purchase of Dorlcote Mill, which both view as a "capital investment" [269], not an outgrowth of nature, and the successful bidder plans to modernize its operation with steam power.) The narrative constructs in Guest and Co. a business that crosses through a broad timespan of economic and social formations, and in so doing it represents the Victorian middle class and its economic base simultaneously at its moment of emergence and in its full flowering.

If Tulliver's mill represents a pre-industrial economy and Guest and Co. simultaneously represents mercantilism and industry, the novel's women characters signify the two different middle-class ideologies that accompany these economies, the dying and the new. The earlier is represented by the Dodson sisters, the later by Maggie Tulliver. Like Mrs. Poyser in *Adam Bede*, who makes a quarter of the family income with her dairy and saves another quarter, the Dodson sisters represent the pre-industrial woman of the middle rank who had not yet been sequestered in her own Victorian "private sphere" but who still participated in an integrated family economy. As girls, they all had independent earnings and made their own purchases of much-cherished plates and teapots, and they all spun their own linen (again like Mrs. Poyser) and had it woven by an itinerant hand weaver, an occupation that suffered complete extinction because of industrialization.

The rise of one particular kind of middle class and the fall of its pre-industrial precursor can be measured by the rise and fall of the four Dodson sisters and their
husbands. Of the four sisters, Mrs. Glegg most zealously preserves the traditional Dodson ways. "Allowed to keep her own money" (138) and to invest it herself, Mrs. Glegg still makes her own (inedible) pastry and damson cheese, keeps her money at home, not in a bank, and loves bargaining with the packman, a figure familiar from her childhood. While Mrs. Glegg and Mrs. Pullet started out with a higher status than that of Mrs. Deane, the success of Guest and Co. means that Mrs. Deane is, when the novel opens, the highest ranking because the richest of the sisters. Mr. Glegg, who "save[d] money slowly" as a wool-stapler, an occupation from the days before the rise of cotton and industrialization, and "retire[d] on a moderate fortune" as a deliberately anachronistic gentleman farmer, is old-fashioned. His way is superseded by that of Mr. Deane: to "get a situation in a great house of business and rise fast" (239), as Tom admiringly puts it. Mrs. Deane can afford to demote the things she once purchased with her own money to second best, while Mrs. Tulliver has sunk lower and lower as her husband's business declines and fails. Dorlcote Mill represents everything that Guest and Co., and its modern linseed oil mill, are not: Mr. Tulliver has no idea of modernizing his equipment and is the enemy even of modern agriculture, as his lawsuit against Pivart—who is using water upstream from Dorlcote to irrigate his fields—attests. His economic failure means that Mrs. Tulliver loses the china and linens that her wealthy sister can disdain.

Maggie Tulliver is not normally read in class or economic terms. Critics, especially feminists including myself, have tended to find in her localized autobiographical referents, or the representation of struggling and impassioned womanhood in a culture without educational and occupational opportunities for women, or the representation of timeless female sexuality. Indeed, she would seem to be the novel's most fully realized representation of the natural, of that which is resistant to socio-economic construction. A creature of impulses, she is likened to a Shetland pony and to a terrier in early scenes. Mary Jacobus, reading Maggie through Luce Irigaray's associations of liquidity with femaleness, sees Maggie's drowning

releasing a swirl of (im)possibility. . . . It is surely at this moment in the novel that we move most clearly into the unbounded realm of desire, if not of wish fulfillment. It is at this moment of inundation, in fact, that the themes of female desire surface most clearly. (221–22)

Because the narrative represents her interiority so compellingly, Maggie's fall into school-teaching poverty and her temporary rise, as Lucy Deane's guest, into lace and luxury seem, in readings like Jacobus's, external to her characterization. Indeed, the only approximation of a class marker that the novel ever explicitly gives her is the epithet "queen" or "queenly." She wants to be queen of the gypsies, and with her hair done up in a "coronet" she "showed a queenly head above her old frocks" (310). Cathy Shuman has shown that because "queen" does not actually name a class, but rather a unique individual who transcends class, Victorians used the term to denote an ideal of femininity that supposedly crossed class
boundaries. For Ruskin, for example, all British women are “called to a true queenly power,” which means providing sympathy and moral guidance within the domestic sphere. But of course he can’t mean all British women, only those who have a domestic sphere to preside over and a husband both to fund it and to benefit from it—that is, married middle-class women. And Queen Victoria’s own project, so far as one can tell, was to model herself after, and by her example to encourage the further creation of, the ideal middle-class housewife. When Maggie seeks to be queen of the gypsies, what she really wants is to teach them the value of imperialism (she offers them a lesson on Columbus) and to be served her tea. What seems class-transcendent about the term “queen,” when used about Maggie, is actually middle-class ideology masked as a universal. It is precisely the amorphousness of Maggie’s class position, her apparently cross-class or natural femininity—her way of seeming to represent “woman” or “female desire”—that makes her the novel’s chief signifier of the new economy and the new middle class, a class that seeks to efface the fact that it is a class and strives instead to consolidate its predominance by generalizing its tendencies as human nature. 8

When Maggie is swept away in scenes of the kind of passionate liquidity with which Jacobus associates Maggie’s “unbounded . . . female desire,” it is worth noting that signifiers of middle-class industry are always present too. “Borne along by the tide” (479) with Stephen, Maggie spends the fateful night with him on board “a Dutch vessel going to Mudport,” where she is spotted by Bob, traveling on business. In her death scene, when again Maggie is swept away on the river, the actual agency of her drowning is “huge fragments” of “[s]ome wooden machinery [that] had just given way on one of the wharves” (545). These fragments are described as “the hurrying, threatening masses,” words that could well describe an industrial riot of the 1840s and that forecast the modern economy that both enables and delimits the middle-class culture that Maggie and Tom represent. That the floating agencies of Maggie’s downfall—her disgrace and death—are also agents of commerce is a shorthand way of identifying Maggie’s passion with her representation of the middle class. Like Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss borrows on the credibility of nature—natural passions, but also Maggie’s participation in the continuities of rural life—to authorize the construction of middle-class ascendency.

It might seem perverse to argue that Maggie stands for the ascendency of the middle class; after all, she begins as a member of the old agrarian order and descends from that into poverty, where she remains to the end of her days. In no technical sense does she actually join the new middle class, except as its guest. Lucy Deane, with her sweet demeanor and fashionable clothes, is a more obvious figure for stable middle-class womanhood, but Maggie is the one who does the novel’s work of representing the middle class precisely because, unlike Lucy, she must transcend class boundaries in order to embody it, and because her values are apparently timeless. As Lucy herself puts it in what only seems to be a different context (their emotionally charged last interview), Maggie . . . you are better than I am (535).
It is important to note here that although Tom’s modest, hard-earned business successes entitle him to a place in the lower echelons of the new middle class, the narrative is much less kind to him than it is to Philip Wakem or even to Stephen Guest. These are men whose fathers are so wealthy that they can purchase for their upper-middle-class sons the leisure that mimics aristocratic style. Stephen and Philip know as little about business as does the decorative Lucy, with whom they are linked as consumers of culture and beauty. The irony and pity with which the narrative displays his self-restraint and his naked ambition distances it further from Tom than from Stephen, whose technically more reprehensible laxity is given conventionally moral judgment. Perhaps one reason for this difference is that Tom so openly exposes and embraces his narrowly class-bound aims (and sacrifices Maggie to them), whereas Stephen and Philip, having already arrived, are not associated with the machinery that brought them there. Paradoxically, the novel’s ironic distance from Tom ultimately underscores its endorsement of the values he represents. For Stephen and Philip, as for Maggie, the individual who effaces the marks of membership in the middle class most successfully represents it. But Maggie is the focus of my interest here, because her transcendence of class boundaries, something she does specifically as a woman, exceeds theirs.

When Tom seeks to shift his economic loyalty from his father to his prosperous uncle Deane, he says, "I should like to enter into some business where I can get on—a manly business where I should have to look after things and get credit for what I did. And I shall want to keep my mother and sister" (243). Speculative trade in industrial commodities is “manly,” and manliness is further defined by the dependency of women, here commodified by their equation with the “things” that Tom seeks to “look after.” Moreover, the speculations that make Tom a budding capitalist and that he is "proud" to engage in on behalf of Guest and Co. (340), investments in “Laceham goods,” presuppose a growing class of female consumers. Manliness also means profiting by middle-class women with money to spend on luxuries and the time in which to spend it. (Adam too sells his cleverly contrived cupboards to housewives.) Maggie’s “womanliness” will thus help not only to denote but also to create Tom’s “manliness,” that is, his membership in the new middle class.

Maggie, we know, resists being such a signifier in Tom’s case; she sews for money and later teaches school rather than let Tom support her. Yet, as in the case of Dinah, we never see her at such menial work. The narrative leaps from Mr. Tulliver’s death to the pleasant oasis of Lucy’s plushy parlor, where Maggie is soon to visit on holiday from work. The novel both acknowledges and evades her poverty in other ways as well. Discussing plans for the charity bazaar, Lucy in Stephen’s presence describes Maggie’s plain sewing as “exquisite,” worth displaying as the sort of “fancy work” women of leisure do (395). As with the prospect of dependency on Tom, Maggie resists this effort to appropriate her working life to middle-class leisure: “Plain sewing was the only thing I could get money by; so I was obliged to try and do it well,” she says, making Lucy blush (395). Nonetheless, the novel does in large part recuperate Maggie’s loyalty to the facts of her
poverty as part of her distinctive charm in her new setting: her pride makes her all the more unusual and desirable to the awestruck Stephen. Against her will, she becomes an ornament to middle-class manliness.

Surrounded by upper-middle-class luxury, her chief experience at Lucy’s is of her own desires, both those that can be indulged and those that cannot. But her desire, constructed to seem natural and thus, as with Dinah Morris, a sign of cross-class womanhood, is never as simply natural as it appears. Maggie’s thoughts of Stephen always mingle erotic attraction with desire for luxurious surroundings. She imagines “Stephen Guest at her feet, offering her a life filled with all luxuries, with daily incense of adoration near and distant, and with all possibilities of culture at her command” (457). Just as the novel doesn’t forget but rather recuperates Maggie’s poverty, it reveals that the gratification of her emotions is economically contingent. The music to which Maggie loves to “vibrate” in a way that sounds sexual and therefore natural must be paid for, and she couldn’t afford it before her visit to Lucy. The novel has earlier registered in less personal terms the cost of such pleasures: “good society, floated on gossamer wings of light irony, is of very expensive production, requiring nothing less than a wide and arduous national life condensed in unfragrant deafening factories” (307). Although in this passage Maggie is identified with the working poor through their shared “emphasis of want,” when at Lucy’s Maggie is among the female purchasers who will enrich investors in “Laceham goods” and their like. By identifying her desire for expensive pleasures with her love for Stephen, the novel glamorizes middle-class consumer lust as natural desire. Here Maggie’s desire resembles Hetty’s for Arthur, except that whereas the material base of Hetty’s desire is always laid bare, Maggie’s is simultaneously revealed and concealed. Maggie’s desire—whether for music and beauty or for Stephen Guest—carries her across class boundaries, and thus makes her signify the self-universalizing middle class. Maggie is sympathetic, emotional, impractical, decorative, and morally queenly—in every way the opposite of the Dodson sisters, a signifier of leisure that must be purchased by others.

As Rachel Bowlby has shown, middle-class women are consumers in large part because they are themselves objects to be consumed, and two episodes in particular explore the simultaneous naturalization and commodification of Maggie’s sexuality as it both demarcates class status and generalizes that class status as human nature. The charity bazaar put on by Lucy and her friends, described in “Charity in Full Dress,” dramatizes the distance between the economy of the Dodsons and that of their modern counterparts. Selling “effeminate futilities” (451) to male purchasers for charity is only play-selling, an elaborate game whose actual function is to mark the high status of women who do not actually need to sell anything. At the bazaar, Maggie (who really does need to earn) nonetheless appears with Lucy as one of her kind, and she inadvertently exposes the game’s logic a little too clearly. It is the women themselves who are on sale, as class markers and, in her case, as beautiful bodies. Middle-class men do not ordinarily function as conspicuous consumers, it is the wife’s role to consume the luxuries her husband’s earnings make possible, and at the bazaar the men don’t take seriously
their purchases of bead-mats and wrist-warmer. What they are consumers of is women’s sexuality. The rapid sale of the gentlemen’s dressing-gowns at Maggie’s table is understood by all to derive from her attractiveness to men. Standing at her booth, she is on display for Philip, Stephen, Philip’s father, and indeed for all of fashionable St. Ogg’s, who will later recall (or rather construct in retrospect) the “coarse” style of her beauty that day. Again, what powerfully marks Maggie as a signifier of the new middle-class womanhood is not easy residence within the middle-class pale (like Lucy) but rather the fact that she has crossed class boundaries to be there. The lingering traces of her poverty make visible her active incorporation into the middle-class value system, just as her simple dress accentuates her beauty.

Maggie’s sexuality—what would seem to be most natural about her—is further commodified and channeled into the work of class demarcation in a sequence of passages about her arms, which serve as genteel metonymies for her breasts. Euphemistically described as “broad-chested” as an adolescent, Maggie irritates her Aunt Pullet by having shoulders too broad to fit into her old clothes. “‘Her arms are beyond everything,’ added Mrs. Pullet sorrowfully, as she lifted Maggie’s large round arm. ‘She’d never get my sleeves on’” (400). Just prior to this scene Maggie has begun to fulfill her desire to learn how to row. Maggie becomes a strong rower, as befits a miller’s daughter; her arms express not only sexual energy but also her connection to the older economy in which women of her class were not afraid of manual work.

In her encounters with Stephen, by contrast, relying on his firm arm is one of her intoxicating pleasures. The sensation of relative weakness defines her desire for Stephen as a signifier of leisure class status. Maggie’s pleasure at Lucy’s house mingles and identifies her relief at no longer having to work with her attraction to Stephen. At the dance, Maggie wears the hand-me-down that had to be altered to expose her too-large arms, sometimes strong, now deferentially weak, and Stephen passionately kisses one of them in a passage that defines his desire too as that of the leisureed consumer (of things, and also in his case of women, or rather of women as things). As they walk in the conservatory, itself a sign of conspicuous consumption, the narrative fetishizes Maggie’s arm on Stephen’s behalf:

Stephen . . . was incapable of putting a sentence together, and Maggie bent her arm a little upward towards the large, half-opened rose that had attracted her. Who has not felt the beauty of a woman’s arm? The unspeakable suggestions of tenderness that lie in the dimpled elbow, and all the varied gently lessening curves down to the delicate wrist, with its tiniest, almost imperceptible nicks in the firm softness. A woman’s arm touched the soul of a great sculptor two thousand years ago so that he wrought an image of it for the Parthenon which moves us still as it claps lovingly the timeworn marble of a headless trunk. Maggie’s arm was such an arm as that, and it had the warm tints of life.

A mad impulse seized on Stephen; he darted towards the arm and showered kisses on it. (clashing the wrists) (462–63)
Note here that the object of Stephen’s desire is not Maggie, or Maggie’s arm, but “the arm,” and that this arm is further objectified by comparison with statuary, headless at that. The fetishizing of this arm shows both that Maggie’s sexuality is no longer for her use but for Stephen’s, and that her sexuality has become a marker of her and Stephen’s rank as consumers. Philip too, as Kristin Brady points out (98), views Maggie as a commodity he has “earned” (322).

The fetishizing of Maggie’s arm combines aspects of commodity and psychanalytic fetishisms. Like the manufactured object that conceals the labor required to produce it, and like the female body part that both reveals and conceals, for Freud’s male viewer, the lack or wound that is castration, Maggie’s arm conceals and reveals both the labor and the wounding effect of women’s work as class signifiers. Rhetorically detached from her body, and distanced too from the productive labor of which we know it is capable, Maggie’s arm serves a function here similar to that of the violent silencing of Mrs. Poyser in debate with Bartle Massey, a cutting off of words that exposes the cost to women of displacing class divisions onto gender hierarchy. It is worth noting here that at age nine Maggie was a powerful fetishist, using a disfigured doll that the narrative calls a “fetish” (34) to work through—to acknowledge and to cover up—her anger about her powerlessness within her family. Her transformation from active fetishist to passive fetish parallels Dinah’s transformation from preacher to domestic wife.

It is an important feature of the class meanings of this scene that Maggie protests against the kiss. To accept it uncomplainingly, much less to reciprocate it, would be the act of a lower-class woman such as Hetty, and Maggie’s feeling of “humiliation” (“what right have I given you to insult me?”) makes it clear that she wishes to be understood as Stephen’s equal. Her sense of equality depends on a desired but impossible erasure of class boundaries; in actuality they can be equals morally or erotically, but not socially. That Maggie nonetheless imagines their social equality contributes to the novel’s consolidation of middle-class dominance by representing middle-class values, such as the propriety and respectability Maggie adheres to, as cross-class ideals. Her natural instincts are also middle-class ones. Stephen seeks to consume Maggie much as Arthur purchases Hetty, but Maggie’s resistance makes her the middle-class—that is, classless—figure Hetty can never be. Like Dinah’s blush, Maggie’s arm identifies the sexual woman with the angelic and proper middle-class ideal.

Soon we learn that Maggie, despite the alienation of her arm, has nonetheless learned to “row splendidly,” and thus can almost dispense, in Lucy’s light phrase, with “the services of knights and squires” (482). But in the excruciating scene of “Borne Along By the Tide,” Maggie’s desire takes the form of languid passivity and fatigue, her failure to seize the oars and save herself (490–91). She is a consumer consumed, in an act that looks so little like consumption that it can be generalized as natural passion, and therefore removed from the register of the economic altogether. She signifies a new economy, and the new social formation that goes with it, by appearing to have nothing to do with economics.
That we know this abdication of her arms' vitality is purely psychosomatic or symbolic is shown by her final action of rowing heroically across the flood back to the mill where she intends to rescue her brother and mother. Assimilated to the Virgin of St. Ogg's, she feels "a sensation of strength, inspired by mighty emotion" (542). When she is once more identified with her origins in agricultural work and with her life prior to leisured desire, Maggie recovers possession of her strength and of her passions. But this is only to say that Maggie's allegedly natural body is once again at the service of class demarcation. And in any case, as we have seen, the moment of her death renews her passion to her modernity, and makes that modernity timeless.

NOTES

1. But see Fisher 39-40, for the argument that the novel never divides work and home. Fisher makes a point about Mill on the Floss that seems even more applicable to Adam Bede: by the end, social institutions have vanished and been replaced by the family (95).

2. Other readers have noted that the removal of "potentially disruptive elements" makes for a peaceful ending; see, for example, Shuttleworth 24, 42; Fisher 63; Brady 85. My point here pertains to the class as well as gender meanings of that stability.

3. This social harmony is essentially Shuttleworth's initial point about the novel (24ff). Wilhelm von Riehl writes, in Eliot's admiring paraphrase, that "there are three natural ranks or estates." She endorses Riehl's view that peasants are a "race" (274). Briggs points out that by the 1820s "class" had become the usual term; "rank" or "order" were anachronistic terms used only by conservatives who preferred to see social divisions as natural and immutable, not socially or economically constructed ("Language"). Eliot's use of "rank," and especially of "race," marks her essay's social conservatism. Fisher sees the novel exposing this stability as coercive (53ff).

4. Shuttleworth notes that in this scene "physical contact breaks down the social divisions" (39), but she sees the scene ultimately reinforcing those divisions.

5. What happens here illustrates the argument I have proposed about the difference between Armstrong's reading of novels of the "hungry forties," in which she sees the working class translated into monstrous females who may then be exercised from these novels' safe conclusions, and those of Eliot's more secure and prosperous day.

6. If Guest and Co. makes ink, one may speculate which of the two mills, and therefore which economy, Eliot the author really favors.

7. See, for example, Beer (97-103), who describes the ending as "orgasmic" (102) and writes that "the level of desire explored at the end of the book is a-historical" (99); or Miller.

8. Here I am following Armstrong's suggestion that the production of female subjectivity and the emotive, psychologized female self consolidate middle-class ascendency by displacing class conflict. Armstrong makes these suggestions about earlier novels, especially the Brontës', but not about Mill on the Floss itself. Armstrong's paragraph on this novel focuses on Maggie as a woman punished and cast out of the novel for excess desire.

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