Interpreting Cleopatra

AESTHETIC GUIDANCE IN
CHARLOTTE BRONTË’S VILLETTE AND
GEORGE ELIOT’S MIDDLEMARCH

“Hitherto I have only had instinct to guide me in judging art,” wrote Charlotte Brontë after reading John Ruskin’s Modern Painters, Volume 1, in 1848; “I feel more as if I had been walking blindfold—this book seems to give me eyes. I do wish I had pictures within reach by which to test the new sense. . . . However eloquent and convincing the language in which another’s opinion is placed before you, you still wish to judge for yourself” (Wise 2: 240). Here, Ruskin has provided Brontë with a method of seeing, but her eyes will remain her own. In Villette (1853), Lucy Snowe expresses a similar relationship to art—one we will see as distinctly Protestant: “I liked to visit picture-galleries, and I dearly liked to be left there alone” (248, chap. 19). Lucy, however, is never left entirely to her own devices in a Villette art gallery crowded with viewers and artworks. Other visitors try to manage her gaze, and written information about the artworks structures her interpretations. Despite the fact that this art gallery scene is set in France, Lucy’s encounter with and response to such competing demands for her attention reflect the profound changes to British Victorian art institutions and viewing practices that I describe in chapter 5.

The Victorian women novelists whom I study in this essay, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, themselves grappled with this same problem of
encountering artworks in crowded public spaces. These novelists evidently read contemporary art critics, including Ruskin and Jameson, and used their lessons—especially the admiration for private spaces—in key moments of spectatorship. While the heroines of Villette and Middlemarch are eventually able to study artworks in public, their most meaningful encounters are private ones. In particular, private viewings allow Lucy and Dorothea Brooke the freedom to apply their own interpretations of artworks to what are at the time unhappy romantic lives. Both characters are able to see through art objects that the men they thought would bring fulfillment to them are unlikely to do so, thus echoing Helen Huntingdon’s growing perceptive ability in The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. Brontë and Eliot posit through these scenes a feminist aesthetic as these women learn to become active interpreters rather than merely the objects of male gazes. Moreover, in leaving these representations uncertain, these authors suggest that readers too should treat artworks as opportunities for interpretive work, especially in the symbolic realm. Capitalizing on two other key contemporary art critical concerns, Brontë and Eliot demonstrate the importance of attribution and authenticity—strikingly, while each depicting artworks named “Cleopatra.” But they also show that the attributions of artworks are much less stable than contemporary art critics recognized. By playfully manipulating these instabilities, the novelists imply links to the changing lives of their heroines and to their own pseudonymous statuses as artists. Eliot properly identifies the Sleeping Ariadne statue, but notes that the characters in Middlemarch know it as Cleopatra. Brontë purposely misnames her novel’s Cleopatra, a painting based on a work with a different name and subject matter. But the “false” name of both artworks—Cleopatra—has as much significance for the novels as their real identities.

Writing at cross-purposes to some art critics’ emphasis on elevating national taste, Brontë and Eliot represent the particular problems faced by women in art venues. Placing Lucy Snowe and Dorothea Brooke in foreign art galleries provides a less threatening example of interpretive freedom by avoiding more direct references to contemporary debates about British art. But the parallels to and implications for British spectatorship are clear. Similarly to contemporary art critics, Brontë and Eliot describe galleries crowded with artworks, information, and visitors. Lucy Snowe and Dorothea Brooke also encounter men who are concerned with where these women are looking or who treat them as aesthetic objects. Demonstrating their intellectual independence, Lucy and Dorothea manage to choose among these competing demands on their attention, forming their own interpretations of artworks and providing models for readers of the novels.
Upon her early-morning arrival at the Villette art gallery, it seems that Lucy will have the solitude that she desires. But, after examining the *Cleopatra*, Lucy notes that “the room, almost vacant when I entered, began to fill” (250, chap. 19). Lucy claims not to have noticed the crowding of the gallery—she says, “as, indeed, it did not matter to me”—and begins to inspect other artworks. But she cannot ignore the other visitors in the gallery for long: the Catholic schoolteacher Monsieur Paul Emanuel escorts her away from the *Cleopatra* and toward didactic religious paintings. Lucy decides that these paintings’ subjects are far less interesting and remarks sarcastically to herself, “It was impossible to keep one’s attention long confined to these masterpieces, and so, by degrees, I veered round, and surveyed the gallery” (253). Lucy studies the other spectators in the gallery, including M. Paul, who looks at the *Cleopatra* while intermittently glancing at Lucy to ensure that she is not observing it. Lucy later tells him that she has viewed the forbidden painting all along: “I have looked at her a great many times while Monsieur has been talking: I can see her quite well from this corner” (255). Jill Matus claims that Lucy’s “gaze does not usually unsettle those around her or allow her to appropriate control and power” (“Looking” 345–46), but Lucy’s admission must surprise M. Paul. Of course, M. Paul is not a professional art critic; however, he does represent a controlling figure in Victorian art criticism: the tour guide. Yet M. Paul demonstrates that even if art critics could accompany their readers (as many pretended to do in their writings), they could not completely manage which artworks viewers chose to inspect.

M. Paul also expresses the fear that, without a chaperone, Lucy will be observed by male viewers. Middle-class women became the largest single group of gallery visitors during the Victorian period, a fact that heightened the anxiety that they would be exposed to the male view. But Brontë’s scene suggests that the underlying concern may have been women’s new freedom to spectate. Just as Lucy looks at whatever art she pleases, she regards the other gallery visitors, often without being observed. She remarks, for example, that Dr. John “was looking for me, but had not yet explored the corner where the schoolmaster [M. Paul] had just put me. I remained quiet; yet another minute I would watch” (257). As Alison Byerly notes, “She remains in the shadows while he [Dr. John] takes the spotlight. He is unwittingly thrust into the typically female position: on stage” (102). While art critics worried about the distracting influence of crowds in galleries, Brontë presents Lucy’s notice of others as liberating.

Lucy’s independence is qualified by certain features of the Villette art gallery. She rejects M. Paul’s attempts to direct her gaze, but is guided by
the disposition of the *Cleopatra*. Protecting certain pieces of art became relatively commonplace in the 1850s as larger crowds flocked to galleries, a practice that often enhanced the artwork’s popularity. Ruskin hoped that particular gallery arrangements would direct viewers toward the most instructive and worthy artworks, even as he disliked the adulation of popular paintings. Though Lucy derides the *Cleopatra* as “of pretentious size, set up in the best light, having a cordon of protection stretched before it, and a cushioned bench duly set in front for the accommodation of worshiping connoisseurs” (249–50), she and others linger before this artwork. While Lucy seeks to differentiate herself from those she sarcastically calls “worshiping connoisseurs,” she accepts some forms of guidance.

Most prominently, Lucy’s catalogue structures her interpretation of the *Cleopatra*. After reading the name of the painting, Lucy contemplates the sexualized and slothful nature of this *Cleopatra*: “She had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa. She ought likewise to have worn decent garments; a gown covering her properly, which was not the case” (250). Like Lucy, most Victorian readers would have been familiar with contemporary accounts of the Orient and imagined an exotic Cleopatra. But Brontë nevertheless had a choice as to how she described a painting entitled *Cleopatra*. Writes Matus, “When Brontë labels the subject of her painting she is not thinking of Cleopatra as the intelligent, powerful, and ruthless Queen of Egypt, but Cleopatra as a dark, indolent gipsy-queen” (“Looking” 355). Lucy describes the Cleopatra as “huge” and “dark-complexioned” (250), which suggests the qualities that Matus notes as well as a kind of racialized sexuality that would have resonated with Victorian stereotypes about Oriental women.

That Brontë consciously decided to emphasize the subject’s sexuality becomes clearer in examining her source painting. As Gustave Charlier first noticed, Brontë based her *Cleopatra* on an actual painting that she had seen at the Brussels Salon in 1842, *Une Almé*, by Edouard De Biefve. De Biefve’s painting—not of Cleopatra, but of a fully clothed dancing girl—seems restrained to modern viewers. But Brontë’s depiction of the *Cleopatra* is consistent with contemporary reviews of *Une Almé*. “We should have preferred as title for this work: *A Slave of the Harem*,” remarked one writer (qtd. in Charlier 389). Brontë thus draws on both popular assumptions about the Cleopatra myth and reviews of *Une Almé* to provide a model of femininity that Lucy necessarily rejects. Lucy refuses the image of woman as a sexualized, useless being, and indicates that she will avoid this role in her own life. However, her passive waiting for M. Paul at the end of the novel seems to subvert somewhat this liberated sentiment.
Lucy’s prescriptive derision of the *Cleopatra* clashes with her own wish to be left alone while viewing art. She leaves little room for the reader to interpret the painting differently, and Lucy’s own opinion is much structured by its disposition and by the catalogue. Further, her general views of art are heavily influenced by Ruskin, especially in her interpretations of natural elements: “These [pictures] are not a whit like nature. Nature’s daylight never had that colour; never was made so turbid, either by storm or cloud, as it is laid out there, under a sky of indigo: and that indigo is not ether; and those dark weeds plastered upon it are not trees” (249). But Brontë does indicate ways in which readers can bring their own understanding to the novel’s paintings. First, a small minority of Brontë’s readers could have seen the *Cleopatra*’s differently titled source painting. More importantly, by incorporating Ruskinian art critical theories, Brontë allows for various interpretations of the Villette gallery artworks. Because Ruskin did not equate truth to nature with mere mimesis, the viewer has much leeway, as Lucy demonstrates, to determine this truth. Ruskin wanted viewers to work creatively in deciphering artworks, not to follow authority blindly. In *Villette*, Lucy observes that Dr. John expresses the kind of insight into art that Ruskin advocated: “I always liked dearly to hear what he had to say about either pictures or books; because, without pretending to be a connoisseur, he always spoke his thought, and that was sure to be fresh: very often it was also just and pithy” (257). Dr. John is not didactic; Lucy suggests that he is willing to have a reciprocal conversation about art. His insights contain the “freshness” that Ruskin equated with active interpretation on the part of a viewer.

However, Dr. John lacks genuine enthusiasm, which Ruskin and Brontë believed was crucial to understanding art. Lucy later complains that Dr. John “could feel, and feel vividly in his way, but his heart had no chord for enthusiasm” (324, chap. 23). For most Victorians, enthusiasm was an ideal state, not just for art reception, but for the appreciation of noble emotions. Dr. John’s shallow feeling for art indicates a lack of concern for others. By contrast, Lucy’s passion for a few artworks suggests an enthusiasm that marks her larger sympathy: “These exceptions I loved: they grew dear as friends” (249, chap. 19). Such passion could stereotype a viewer, and particularly a female one, as having a frivolous appreciation for art. Yet the works that Lucy endorses possess certain admirable criteria: “An expression in this portrait proved clear insight into character; a face in that historical painting, by its vivid filial likeness, startlingly reminded you that genius gave it birth” (249). The combination of such standards with affective responses to art, missing in many standard gallery guides, was a
distinctive trait of such diverse Victorian art critics as Anna Jameson, Elizabeth Eastlake, and Walter Pater.

Among the paintings that Lucy sees, the boyhood portrait of Dr. John demonstrates with particular force how ekphrastic descriptions can challenge readers to decipher meaning. The adult Lucy closely studies the portrait’s details and suggests that *Villette*’s readers do the same. The work is alive—“fresh, life-like, speaking and animated” (213, chap. 16)—an important criterion for realistic art. But this reality, the “clear insight into character” that it provides, is open. Lucy’s description contains a number of qualifications: Dr. John’s “eyes looked as if when somewhat older, they would flash a lightning response to love: I cannot tell whether they kept in store the steady-beaming shine of faith” (213, emphases mine). The personality traits Lucy attributes to Dr. John are contradictory: he has “a gay smile,” yet “whatever sentiment met him in form too facile, his lips menaced, beautifully but surely, caprice and light esteem” (213). Lucy also allows for readerly interpretation by indicating that this is her own, biased account of the portrait; she muses, “How it was that what charmed so much, could at the same time so keenly pain?” (214). When Lucy later recalls the portrait during her argument with Dr. John over Ginevra Fanshawe, the insight the artwork provides her is again uncertain. Dr. John’s expression, “a subtle ray” out of the corner of his eye reminiscent of the portrait, makes her think him “more clear-sighted” about Ginevra than he indicates. But she wonders if this is merely a “chance look” that has “half led” her “dubiously to conjecture” that the portrait reflects reality (243, chap. 18). By leaving open many possibilities, Brontë prompts readers to work toward their own conclusions.

In *Middlemarch*, George Eliot demonstrates a similar regard for individual interpretations and enthusiastic appreciations of art. Dorothea Brooke complains that most of the artworks on her Roman honeymoon fail to capture the kind of natural truth that Brontë and Ruskin associate with moral enthusiasm: “The painting and sculpture may be wonderful, but the feeling is often low and brutal, and sometimes even ridiculous. Here and there I see what takes me at once as noble—something that I might compare with the Alban Mountains or the sunset from the Pincian Hill” (153, chap. 22). Dorothea does not describe any of these noble artworks, but Eliot mentions one in her journals. In 1870, George Henry Lewes and Eliot stayed in Dresden for six weeks, visiting that city’s famous art gallery three times a week. The masterpiece of the Dresden gallery was Raphael’s
Sistine Madonna (fig. 4), a painting as famous in the Victorian period as Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa is today. Raphael’s Madonna occupied its own room in Dresden, “with a special setting resembling an altarpiece in a chapel” (L. Ormond 45). Upon first seeing the Madonna “on a crowded Sunday,” Eliot “was so struck that she found herself overcome with emotion and had to leave the room” (L. Ormond 45). While Charlotte Brontë’s Lucy Snowe ridicules the disposition of the Villette Cleopatra, and Ruskin often attacked popular artworks, Eliot found the Madonna deeply moving despite its fame. Indeed, as Leonée Ormond demonstrates, Eliot was frequently influenced by the identities and reputations of paintings. However, Eliot’s sources of information—guidebooks and artwork labels—were often incorrect. Many of the paintings that Eliot admired were later proved to be copies or the productions of lesser artists (although not the Sistine Madonna).

Ormond remarks that Eliot’s “mistakes”—the misattributions that she repeats in accounts of her travels to Europe—“can tell us something about her approach to the whole question of artistic creation” (33). However, Ormond does not elaborate on the insight provided into Eliot’s artistic method. I would argue that Eliot plays with the identities of artworks both to guide readers and to allow interpretive space, a dynamic seen across the period’s discourse on the teaching of taste. Eliot demonstrates that she herself can be a savvy consumer of modern art information as well as a victim of its mistakes. Most prominently, artworks are not primarily important because of the names of the artworks themselves (as some Victorian art critics argued) but rather as sites of passionate engagement that counter the valuing of women as mere aesthetic objects.

Eliot’s much-studied Vatican Hall of Statues scene (chap. 19) seems to avoid the excesses of information, visitors, and artworks that I have described as endemic to the Victorian art-viewing experience. In the crowded Villette gallery, Lucy considers the Cleopatra, the still lifes hung underneath, and the four didactic works to which M. Paul leads her. The only artwork described in Eliot’s scene is the Ariadne statue. Yet Eliot places her reader in the Vatican, a venue well-known to mid-Victorian readers as one replete with art objects. “The Vatican,” wrote William Hazlitt earlier in the century, “is rich in pictures, statuary, tapestry, gardens, and in views from it; but its immense size is divided into too many long and narrow compartments” (qtd. in Siegel, Desire and Excess 176). Hazlitt focuses—as did many Victorian critics—on the confusion attendant on the gallery’s physical space. But Eliot emphasizes and exploits a different problem: the dramatic increase in information available to modern viewers of art.
Figure 4
By setting her novel in the early nineteenth century, Eliot can show contemporary readers (that is, of the 1870s) how much more they know about art than do her characters. Chapter 19 opens with telling commentary on viewers and critics of the early 1800s: “Travellers did not often carry full information on Christian art either in their heads or their pockets; and even the most brilliant English critic of the day [Hazlitt] mistook the flower-flushed tomb of the ascended Virgin for an ornamental vase due to the painter’s fancy” (130). In his Notes of a Journey through France and Italy (1826), Hazlitt identified the flowers in Raphael’s The Coronation of the Virgin as decorative rather than as symbolic of the Virgin’s resurrection (Witemyer 85)—a claim corrected by Anna Jameson in Legends of the Madonna (1852). Eliot knew Jameson’s work well, and thus demonstrates her own knowledge of contemporary Victorian art criticism in chiding Hazlitt (Wiesenfarth 371).

Such corrections are not merely pedantic. Adolf Naumann, Will Ladislaw, and Dorothea see in the Vatican Hall of Statues “the reclining Ariadne, then [that is, in the 1830s] called the Cleopatra” (131). While these characters would have called the statue “Cleopatra,” readers of Middlemarch in the 1870s would have known this statue by its proper title: Ariadne (fig. 5). As Abigail Rischin demonstrates, identifying the statue’s correct name and its mythological connotations allowed contemporary readers to guess at what might happen between Dorothea and Will: just as Ariadne was abandoned by Theseus and later saved by Dionysus, Dorothea is neglected by her husband and might be rescued by Will (1127). Like Brontë’s artwork, Eliot’s “Cleopatra” (the “false” name of the statue) introduces an erotic element into the story, in this case by suggesting that Will and Dorothea might become lovers. Will’s reaction to seeing Dorothea juxtaposed with the Ariadne intimates this: “He felt as if something had happened to him with regard to her” (133). Earlier in the chapter, Naumann and Will see Dorothea as a living statue—“a breathing blooming girl, whose form, not shame by the Ariadne, was clad in Quakerish grey drapery”—and Naumann further aestheticizes her by hoping to create her portrait (131). As my analyses of North and South and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall demonstrate, women Victorian novelists were particularly concerned that the new emphasis on seeing could be used to objectify women. Their implicit aesthetic commentaries seek to undermine such objectification.

Eliot works against these fixed images by emphasizing the changes in both Dorothea and her relationship with Will. She hopes that her association of Dorothea with a doubly named artwork will both hint at romantic possibilities and encourage active interpretation by Middlemarch readers. In
Figure 5
a letter to her publisher, John Blackwood, Eliot remarked, “Any observation of life and character must be limited, and the imagination must fill in and give life to the picture” (qtd. in Byerly 123). Eliot’s preference for creative interpretation over surface appearances is stated in the first few pages of the novel, when she warns her reader not to confuse inner character with physical looks: “Poor Dorothea! compared with her, the innocent-looking Celia was knowing and worldly-wise; so much subtler is a human mind than the outside tissues which make a sort of blazonry or clock-face for it” (3, chap. 1, emphasis mine). For Eliot, the real is not reducible to visible facts. By contrast, many Victorian critics began to view more factual commentary—for example, that concerning form or precise attribution—as a mark of their professionalism. As I will argue in chapter 7, a good number of the period’s art critics worked against this approach by emphasizing the unknowable and the possibility for affective connections with artworks.

While seemingly agreeing with this more subjective aesthetic, Eliot complicates the possibilities for feeling and interpretation by representing the challenges presented by venues crammed with art objects. Dorothea is somewhat able to focus on the Ariadne in the Vatican Hall of Statues, but finds her viewing experiences in most Roman galleries deeply disheartening:

There are comparatively few paintings that I can really enjoy. At first when I enter a room where the walls are covered with frescoes, or with rare pictures, I feel a kind of awe. . . . But when I begin to examine the pictures one by one, the life goes out of them, or else is something violent and strange to me. It must be my own dullness. I am seeing so much all at once, and not understanding the half of it. . . . It is painful to be told that anything is very fine and not be able to feel that it is fine—something like being blind, while people talk of the sky. (143, chap. 21)

During her travels to Europe, Eliot similarly complained about seeing too much: “So many pictures have faded from my memory[,] even of those which I had time to distinguish” (qtd. in L. Ormond 42). Contemporary art critics would undoubtedly suggest guidance, but Edward Casaubon’s connoisseurship and Will’s technical advice do not encourage emotional responses. Lacking moral enthusiasm, Casaubon fails to appreciate the “strangely impressive objects around them. . . . What was fresh to her mind was worn out in his; and such capacity of thought and feeling as had ever been stimulated in him by the general life of mankind had long shrunk to a sort of dried preparation, a lifeless embalmment of knowledge” (136–
Rather surprisingly, Will’s comments are similarly devoid of human feeling. At one point, he assures Dorothea that “there is a great deal in the feeling for art which must be acquired. . . . Art is an old language with a great many artificial affected styles, and sometimes the chief pleasure one gets out of knowing them is the mere sense of knowing” (143, chap. 21). But upon seeing an example of such an “artificial affected style,” a painting by Naumann, Dorothea objects to this kind of deciphering: “What a difficult kind of shorthand! . . . It would require all your knowledge to be able to read it” (148, chap. 22) and remarks, “I think I would rather feel that painting is beautiful than have to read it as an enigma” (149, emphasis mine). Dorothea’s emphasis on feeling mirrors a prominent theme in the most influential Victorian art commentary from the beginning to the end of the period.

Eliot’s title for book 2, “Old and Young,” intimates the differences between art appreciation based on overfamiliarity and that stemming from enthusiastic inexperience. The title, however, does not quite match up with the ages of Eliot’s characters. Both Casaubon and the younger Will seem too knowing about art. Dorothea provides a better model by learning to appreciate art based on feeling. Earlier in the novel, responding to Will’s sketch, Dorothea indicates that she might not be susceptible to art: “You know, uncle, I never see the beauty of those pictures which you say are so much praised. They are a language I do not understand. I suppose there is some relation between pictures and nature which I am too ignorant to feel” (53, chap. 9). Dorothea’s uncle, Mr. Brooke, is unlikely to teach her; his claim that some paintings are valuable lacks personal conviction. Like Will and Casaubon, he discusses art in a pedantic, worn-out way, telling Dorothea, “You had a bad style of teaching . . . else this is just the thing for girls—sketching fine art and so on. But you took to drawing plans; you don’t understand morbidezza, and that kind of thing” (53). Remarks Bert Hornback in his explanatory notes for Middlemarch, “Morbidezza was a term popular with eighteenth-century art critics to describe that style of painting characterized by extreme delicacy and softness” (53n). Similar to her response to Will’s sketch, Dorothea believes that the artworks at the Grange, “these severe classical nudities and smirking Renaissance-Correg-giosities[,] were painfully inexplicable, staring into the midst of her Puritanic conceptions: she had never been taught how she could bring them into any sort of relevance with her life” (49). At stake for Dorothea as well as for Lucy is developing feelings for artworks that do not offend their Protestantism.
Interpreting Cleopatra

Like Brontë, Eliot hints that private settings may provide an even better opportunity for women viewers to interpret and form personal connections with art, thereby questioning the contemporary value placed on mass accumulation in public galleries. Upon returning from Rome, Dorothea sees most of the furnishings in Lowick Manor’s blue-green boudoir as lifeless. One object “gathered new breath and meaning: it was the miniature of Mr. Casaubon’s aunt Julia, who had made the unfortunate marriage—of Will’s grandmother. Dorothea could fancy that it was alive now” (190, chap. 28). But the reality present in the miniature, a sense gained from Dorothea’s disappointment in her own marriage, is by no means straightforward. The miniature depicts “the delicate woman’s face which yet had a headstrong look, a peculiarity difficult to interpret. Was it only her friends who thought her marriage unfortunate? or did she herself find it out to be a mistake, and taste the salt bitterness of her tears in the merciful silence of night?” (190, chap. 28). The “difficulty” here for readers is not the artwork itself, but the narrator’s description, which leaves open Aunt Julia’s own thoughts on her marriage and the applicability of her experience to Dorothea’s.

Eliot suggests the power of such private aesthetics in the public realm and thus echoes my discussion of household taste in chapter 2. In particular, the complexity associated with Aunt Julia’s miniature challenges stereotypical ways of envisioning women in other parts of Middlemarch. In chapter 19, Naumann asks Will, “You are not angry with me for thinking Mrs. Second-Cousin the most perfect young Madonna I ever saw?” (132). Naumann’s comment fails to account for the intricacy indicated by Eliot’s connection of Dorothea with the Cleopatra/Ariadne. Eliot may have admired the Sistine Madonna, but her heroine is not reducible to a “perfect young Madonna.” Naumann and Will’s quarrel over how to describe Dorothea further reveals the deficiency of labels. Understandably, Will rejects Naumann’s reference to Dorothea as his “great-aunt.” Dorothea is technically Will’s “second cousin” in-law, but he tells Naumann to call her instead “Mrs. Casaubon”—a public name disliked by both Will and Dorothea.

Both Eliot and Brontë believed that there was much advantage to obfuscating their own public identities. Eliot famously wrote to William Blackwood in 1857, “Whatever may be the success of my stories, I shall be resolute in preserving my incognito, having observed that a nom de plume secures all the advantages without the disagreeables of reputation” (qtd. in Hirsch 2). Similarly, Charlotte Brontë, in her 1850 “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell,” explained the Brontë sisters’ decision to use pseud-
onyms: “Averse to public publicity [. . .] we veiled our names under those of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell” (qtd. in Levine, “Harmless Pleasures” 275). But under these false names, Eliot and Brontë hoped that they would be recognized—not merely identified—through their works. As Caroline Levine notes, Brontë’s use of the verb “veil” demonstrates the contradictory impulses of concealment and revelation. Displaying similar wishes, Eliot wrote Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, the well-known landscape painter and feminist activist, “You are the first friend who has given any symptom of knowing me—the first heart that has recognized me in a book [Adam Bede] which has come from my heart of hearts” (qtd. in Hirsh 5). Joseph Liggins’s false claim to be the author of Adam Bede prevented some of her other friends from knowing her, and Eliot was eventually forced to disclose her identity after the subsequent scandal. By contrast, Brontë viewed her pseudonym as a game: “It is time the obscurity was done away. [. . .] The little mystery which formerly yielded some harmless pleasure, has lost its interest” (qtd. in Levine, “Harmless Pleasure” 275). Brontë’s valuing of mystery in matters of attribution presages later Victorian art commentary—most prominently, Walter Pater’s Renaissance.

Thus, while the complex identities of the authors, characters, and artworks of Villette and Middlemarch certainly owe much to Victorian problems of gender and authorship, they are also rooted in the nineteenth-century culture of art, a culture deeply influenced by the 1835–36 select committee. In particular, the committee’s twin emphases on verbal direction and expertise in specific fields of the arts found expression in a movement, largely populated by female critics, toward precise scholarship on art. Eliot’s use of Jameson to correct Hazlitt not only serves to introduce a scene of contested artworks, but also places Eliot in a field of women writers who questioned the assumptions that great art was produced only by the most famous artists and that only men could comment on these works. In Impressions of Theophrastus Such (1879), Eliot wrote:

It is a commonplace that words, writings, measures, and performances in general, have qualities assigned them not by a direct judgement on the performances themselves, but by a presumption of what they are likely to be, considering who is the performer. [. . .] But that our prior confidence or want of confidence in given names is made up of judgements just as hollow as the consequent praise or blame they are taken to warrant, is less commonly perceived, though there is a conspicuous indication of it in the surprise or disappointment often manifested in the disclosure of an authorship about which everybody has been making wrong guesses. (qtd. in Hirsch 7)
As if to remind readers of the disjunctions between artist and artwork and private and public lives, both Eliot and Brontë continued to use their pseudonyms for Villette and Middlemarch, novels that themselves manipulate the identities of artworks in ways that would have scandalized many Victorian art critics. The typical mid-Victorian art commentator authoritatively named artworks; Eliot and Brontë exploit the indeterminacy in the modern art world by creatively modifying these attributive concerns in order to complicate images of women.