Chapter 4

Contract and Freedom(?): Constrained Existence in *Middlemarch* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

The previous chapter examined styles of relational liberalism in contracts and the socialized market they envisioned, by probing the project of abstraction. In this chapter I turn to another persistent theme of contracts histories, namely, the ideological association of liberal contract with freedom. The novels read in this chapter, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* of 1871,[1] Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Castebridge* of 1886, complete my analyses in chapter 3 on a number of levels.

First, here too I examine a significant divergence from atomistic individualism in contracts. The novels discussed here represent contract as constraint, and so reveal a mood at virtual opposition to the celebratory tones of contract as freedom. The nineteenth century was from early on preoccupied with philosophies of freedom, will and volition, and attendant questions of determinism and necessity, all of these within tensions between religious and secular worldviews. The question in what sense a person was free to contract, or in what sense her promise represented a willed obligation, found different responses, metaphysical, psychological and sociological. My discussion touches these debates, yet I am less interested in conceptualizing different theoretical positions, an intellectual project that has received justifiably vast attention, than in highlighting an association between contract and constraint which was focused on relationality. While *Ruth* and *Bleak House* were involved in a midcentury project of imposing on readers the significance of relationality for individual agency and for the morality of choice, with *Middlemarch* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* the effort was to clarify the constraints involved in the inescapability of "connexions," and to explore the delimiting implications of living in a web of relationships. Rather than extensions of the individual – ways to improve and expand her scope of self-determination, promises were fictionalized as figures for her points of break, anxiety, and limitation. No romanticism remains, if one was ever imagined. The cultural consciousness that these novels imply, the mood they adopted, are significant from the perspective of contracts histories because,

[1] All references are to Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, ed. Dale Kramer, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, ed. David Carroll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

as we have seen in chapter 1, while historians do not collectively insist on a single philosophical meaning of freedom and related concepts, they do collectively suggest that contract became culturally prominent because it signaled them in some sense.

Read through the lens of contracts histories, one explanation for the opposition to the contract-freedom trope could be the rise of collectivism in the closing decades of the nineteenth century; as discussed in chapter 1, collectivism is often interpreted as a response to the excesses of atomism, particularly as it implicated power disparities in contracts. The wary mood toward promises at stake here would seem in line with the collectivist critical mood. Hardy in particular shared radical political sentiments. Yet the concerns I elaborate were not aligned with the emphases traced by contracts histories: neither power disparities nor a search for alternatives *to* contract occupied the center of *Middlemarch* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*; the question is not collective solutions. Instead we see an investigation of terms of existence which Raymond Williams described in both Eliot and Hardy as registrations of a creative disturbance, records of struggles of an unprecedented time.[2] Both novels investigated a world predominated by individualized relationships as a new kind of world. They therefore deepen my argument that the relational sociality of contract and the market had deep and far ranging, while not consistently enthusiastic, resonance.

Second, *Middlemarch* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* reveal complex dialogues with the concerns explored, respectively, in *Bleak House* and *Ruth*. *Middlemarch* was capacious in its social representation and shared with *Bleak House* the ambition of the web imagery. But Eliot turned on its head Dickens' main point, namely, comprehensible connexions. Instead, the web in Eliot is an entanglement which cannot be grasped wholly. Contract and promise are for her key sites expressive of the modern limitations embedded in capitalist society. While Dickens made room for the capitalist market by virtue of its openness to relational sociality, Eliot incorporated popular political-economic advice about economic prudence into the terms of meaningful existence in the web of constraints.

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* the problem of contractual agency was framed as a misguided masculine performance. If Gaskell's protagonist has to struggle with expectations from women, and experiences fall and rise, Hardy's protagonist, Michael Henchard, pays the price that contract's masculinity imposed on men, and, with Hardy's bleaker outlook, experiences a rise and fall. Taken together, *Ruth* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* deepen the conceptual implications of gender that feminist histories of contracts have recovered. Gaskell's *Ruth* began with a gender-informed relational

[2] Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrenc*e (London: Hogarth Press, 1984), 85.

vision to model the market at large, while Hardy captured the masculine side of contracts not as power but as constraint, an outlook that remains to be engaged in contracts histories beyond issues of marriage. Both underlined, if with inverse moods, the relationality of contracts.

Ultimately both *Middlemarch* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* accounted for the capitalist social order as a negotiation of relationally-constrained lives, Hardy, as I will argue in conclusion, with much more skepticism than Eliot.

Suffocation and Economy in *Middlemarch*

Middlemarch's was an ambitious liberal project, drawing together, complicating and extending many of the concerns I have so far discussed. The broadest achievement that will occupy me is a non-naïve and therefore deeply divided liberal consciousness. That consciousness was able at once to invest the capitalist order with meaning by hallowing the efforts it demanded, and to maintain a critical distance from its own investment by acknowledging the suffocations that living in the capitalist order implied. This is a legacy still experienced today, in lives at once fully implicated in the existing order and second-guessing our own implication, hoping that critical awareness is more a reformist than a docile energy.

The web metaphor appears in *Middlemarch* as the implication of moving away from status into an appreciation of multitudinous (as Eliot put it) discrete relationships. The Eliotian web, I will argue, is not a structure, in contrast with the Dickensian one; indeed structures were for Eliot imagined projections of a status-based worldview which induces blindness and misunderstanding. The alternative, appropriate to modern living and Eliot's realism, is a constant negotiation of inescapable interdependencies, appearing as obstacles and barring a holistic vision. The consciousness that goes along with this picture is of suffocation: as characters begin to move away from status-consciousness and appreciate interdependencies, they not only experience illimitable and unforeseen pressures, but the constant risk of submitting themselves to others and being annihilated. To maintain the liberal tenet central to *Middlemarch* of differences between individuals, characters need to negotiate the dependence between self and other and reach compromises without obliterating the self or her other, in a dynamic process of relational becoming. The novel's striking tool featuring in the process of becoming is the practice of economy – the famed learning "what everything costs"(762).

Middlemarch's complex liberalism was richly reliant on promises. Promises' attraction as narrative mechanisms speaks to their conceptual role as par excellence cases of relational interdependence, with

all the suffocation involved. Read this way, Eliot hardly saw contracts as reflecting a social order based on consent, as Dermont Coleman suggests. She instead treated promissory obligations as inescapable in the order of her time, and fictionalized them to seek coping mechanisms, in the hope of attaining, as Coleman puts it, higher moral considerations.[3]

One point about *Middlemarch's* wary framing of promises bears emphasis upfront: legal effectiveness is not the point; contracts and unenforceable promises, reciprocal and nonreciprocal alike are collapsed under a single framework concerned with a common problematic. Cathrine Frank observes the role of wills – legal testamentary instruments – in *Middlemarch*, as tools exerting dramatic pressure on the plot by forming within it a world to which testators attempt to submit their successors.[4] This effect resonates with the work of promises in the text, which likewise involve submissions, yet Frank suggests that it is the legal effectiveness of wills which sets them apart from Eliot's idea of justice. The incessant interest in promises in *Middlemarch* reveals that the problem of submission through instruments of will exceeds the sphere of formal legal power, and speaks to a more fundamental sense of peril in an interdependent society. The problem that Frank attributes to legal enforceability seems to be instead the effect of the disturbance of death which disables relationality as a moderating force, precisely the force central in promises.

The association of promise and contract with constraints rather than freedom, and the turn to economy to handle the suffocations they implied, marks a profound instance of a relational liberalism which is not romantically resistant to the capitalist order but rather resolved to find antidotes to the interdependencies that the order generates within the order's economic language. As characters learn to economize they depart from practicalities; economizing assumes the depth of existential questions which preoccupied Eliot. However, the gap that Eliot herself opened up in insisting that she was dealing with the "unhistoric" stuff of life and yet that she was dealing with deep meaning was huge, and she kept upfront the fear that her tools of mediation were inadequate.

The following discussion begins by expounding the web in *Middlemarch* as a move from status to relationships. I then examine the novel's treatment of existence in the web in terms of suffocation, and its attendant turn to economy, all driven by promissory pressures.

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[3] Dermont Coleman, *George Eliot and Money: Economics, Ethics and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 41. Coleman refers to a consent-based order in Herbert Spencer's sense.

[4] Cathrine O. Frank, *Law, Literature, and the Transmission of Culture in England, 1837-1925* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), chap. 2.

The Web: From Status to Relational Obstacles

Gillian Beer describes the web as a metaphor and metaphoric form found everywhere in Victorian writing, common among scientists, philosophers, poets and novelists.[5] Novelistic uses, however, were diversified in ways relevant for this chapter. Dickens used the web metaphor only once and almost incidentally in *Bleak House*, yet as I argued in chapter 3, the web functioned as a structural basis for his narrative, its logic the ground of "connexions." In *Middlemarch* Eliot centralized the metaphoric use of the web, yet the moral imperative of responsiveness to connections under which Dickens belabored appears in reverse, as characters all too eager to respond are hindered through failures of understanding. Williams described the difference as network vs. web: Dickens' image connects while Eliot's disturbs and obscures.[6]

In what follows I read *Middlemarch's* outlook by engaging three stories, those of Lydgate, Dorothea, and Fred, where the fictionalization of promises is pivotal to the unfolding of the plot. Fred is less central than the first two who are often viewed as the novel's parallel centers, two variations on a single motif of chastening youthful ambition[7]; his story is almost inverse; for that reason, the commonalities are revealing of concerns that exceed the disciplinary notion of chastening.

Brief reminder: Tertius Lydgate is an ambitious surgeon and new arrival to the provincial Middlemarch who marries Rosamond Vincy, daughter of Middlemarch manufacturer and mayor. Lydgate's ambitions clash with his wife's and the Middlemarch community; he quickly contracts debt and in consequence becomes implicated with the corruption of the town's banker and his wife's uncle, Nicholas Bulstrode, whose fortune was built on an illegitimate inheritance. The pious Dorothea Brooke lives on her uncle's estate at the rural outskirts of Middlemarch, which she is expected to inherit. Dorothea constantly conceives redistributive plans for bettering the lives of poor tenants, which remain unheeded. She marries the Reverend Edward Casaubon, a middle-aged scholar and estate owner, but her hopes to find new horizons are disappointed and she finds herself imprisoned in marriage. At Casaubon's deathbed she almost commits to an open-ended promise he asks for, but is saved by the bell of death. Dorothea eventually marries Casaubon's younger cousin Will Ladislaw, thus operationalizing Casaubon's will which disinherits her. Fred Vincy, Rosamond's brother, expects to inherit his uncle

[5] Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 155-56.

[6] Williams, *The English Novel*, 88. He actually argued that *Middlemarch* was more connected than Eliot's other novels, the society more integrated, yet conceded that there too Eliot dealt with restrictions.

[7] E.g., Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 132.

Featherstone and marry his beloved Mary Garth. His road to happiness is strewn with trouble as reckless debts, unpayable when disinheritance materializes, subvert his plans and undermine his standing with the Garths. Shaken by failure, Fred is eventually offered employment by Mary's father, buys the Featherstone estate, and marries Mary. Observe at the outset how these plots are crucially entangled with promises, and how, furthermore, promises are set up in constitutive relations with inheritance, as trouble in the transfer of wealth through inheritance assumes its meaning in promissory contexts, a concern we have also seen in *Bleak House*.

Lydgate, Dorothea and Fred are all eager to engage with the world around them; however, socially-inscribed dispositions disable them from appreciating immediate realities. Lydgate, of aristocratic background, "walked by hereditary habit" (327) and expects life to rearrange itself around his engagement to Rosamond; short of ready money to furnish a new house, he borrows money, signs a bill of sale on his furniture as security to a creditor, and continues to run a household on credit. Fred, the son of a new bourgeois, notices that his father "himself had expensive Middlemarch habits… while mamma had those running accounts with tradespeople, which give the cheerful sense of getting everything one wants without any question of payment" (216), and lives "according to family habits and traditions" (216).[8] He complacently asks Mr. Garth to guarantee a gambling debt. Dorothea marries under imaginative preconceptions about the higher goals she might serve as a scholar's wife. Dorothea's consciousness, and particularly her asceticism, is a function of a life unencumbered by material concerns. Unlike Lydgate's and Fred's positive relation to material convenience, with Dorothea we see a negative one springing from the same source. While the three protagonists cherish idols considered unusual in their surroundings: Dorothea with her religiosity and ascetic egalitarianism, Fred with his unrelenting love for ungenteel Mary, Lydgate with his modern science, their decisions are inescapably conditioned by social background, "[f]or there is no creature," the narrator assures us in generalizing from Dorothea, "whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it" (784-85).

The novel's unfolding of these dispositions is entangled with the important point of estrangement from popular advice on economic prudence. Lydgate's upbringing means that "it had never occurred to

[8] The familial self-reflex with which Fred starts out is figuratively encapsulated in the story of Featherstone's inheritance. When Fred's hopes to inherit Featherstone are disappointed, Fred's mother protests: "I call it a robbery: it was like giving him the land, to promise it; and what is promising, if making everybody believe is not promising?" (322). Mrs Vincy's complaint takes a two-step detour only to arrive at the initial point of self-reflex: the general belief becomes a promise, the promise becomes property, and property cannot be taken away; the Vincy inclinations become almost a material reality. Mrs Vincy's resort to a promise marks the problem, for in *Middlemarch* promise depends on adjustment to relational constraints, missing from the Vincy expectations.

him to devise a plan for getting half-crowns… Money had never been a motive to him" (167-68). The Vincy children "had no standard of economy" (216). The echo of Dickens' Skimpole ("no idea of money") is obscured because what features in Dickens as moral rapacity is explained by Eliot as socially-induced blindness. Finally, Dorothea's Puritan energy threatens to turn her into a wife who "might awaken you some fine morning with a new scheme for the application of her income which would interfere with political economy" (9). Indeed, her misconceived attraction to Casaubon is itself a consequence of frustrated economic plans: "his elevating thought lifted her above her annoyance at being twitted with her ignorance of political economy, that never-explained science which was thrust as an extinguisher over all her lights" (17).

Eliot set her protagonists against the sociality of statuses, from hereon to begin a process of adjustment to otherness within the web, handled with the aid of economy. If society "emerges as a monolith of oppression"[9] in *Middlemarch* that is because of its role as the bearer of status-encoded behavior and responses, framed now as both petty and shallow. Eliot's principle of agency requires individual action beyond class-conditioned reflexes, or, as she more often puts it, "habits." Elain Hadley recovers just this effort in her work on political liberalism of the period. The effort, she claims, was to develop cognitive practices often described as "habits of thought," which would be differently marked from non-individualized reflexive habits.[10] Eliot's protagonists are marked structurally by undergoing a process of change, rather than substantively by aligning with favored moral stances. As individual differences enter characters' frame, they begin a process of becoming through a struggle to reifgure understanding.

To exceed their status-informed consciousness, Eliot's characters must give up the idea of coherence. The web of *Middlemarch* is incomprehensible as a totality and as a structure. While the genealogies in the novel are elaborate and connect its many characters and plots,[11] there is no coherent framework, just a move, often arbitrary, lacking an organizing logic, from one connection to the next. As the finale memorably says, "the fragment of a life, however typical, is not the sample of an even web" (779). This was a final insistence on the principle of narration in which every generalization made is soon

[9] Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1995), 196.
[10] Elaine Hadley, *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
[11] For an overview see Kathleen Blake, ed., *Approaches to Teaching Eliot's* Middlemarch (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1990), Appendix 2.

undermined,[12] and every character's presupposition belied. Comprehension is only of one's own limitations, an openness rooted in humility.

Status-informed consciousness is a generator of misinterpretations in *Middlemarch*, most obvious in the interim stages of plots of adjustment, when protagonists begin to acknowledge concrete otherness yet the pull of preconceptions still applies. Lydgate, for instance, turns to new forms of idealization. As Rosamond reveals ideas of her own about debt, he begins to see her as a different kind of creature so that he might still accept her: "[I]t was inevitable that in that excusing mood he should think of her as if she were an *animal of another and feebler species*" (628; my emphasis). Henry Staten argues that Rosamond is but a mirror of Lydgate's own class tastes, and therefore she sinks him.[13] However, the problem becomes interesting when Eliot lets Lydgate move beyond the initial class reflex toward a consciousness of interdependence, while leaving Rosamond frozen behind. At the interim point of dim awareness, Lydgate's career, like his wife, is reconceptualized too ideally: "[B]y the bedside of patients the direct external calls on his judgment and sympathies brought the added impulse needed to draw him out of *himself*" (628; my emphasis). Lydgate's idealized separations between professional, intimate and economic experience quickly collapse. As Suzanne Graver observes, his failures occur with attempts at these kinds of private/public, feminine/masculine separations.[14] The collapse reveals Lydgate's misreading of web realities; despite the moral attractiveness of his selfless treatment of patients, he has not freed himself of preconceptions which blind him to the full implications of concrete interdependencies. Assumptions about sphere-separations ally with attempts at holistic structures, but the web subsumes all spheres[15] in its demands for an alternative consciousness.

The interim stages in plots of adjustment speak to both the power and faults of socially-inscribed readings of reality. While hard to let go, attempts at coherent accounts of realities turn out to be, in the novel's famed pier-glass parable, a problem of egoism, while reality is unstructured, "minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions" (248). Observe that egoism in Eliot's parable, as in her plot,

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[12] On these reversals see Catherine Gallagher, "George Eliot: Immanent Victorian," *Representations* 90, no. 1 (2005): 61-74. Gallagher explains the gap between the general and the particular in the opposing impulses toward reference (referring to people in the world) and toward realization (resembling people in the world); that fictional persons do not conform to types, Gallagher claims, drives the desire for fiction. See also Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, "Negotiating *Middlemarch*," in Middlemarch *in the Twenty First Century*, ed. Karen Chase (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 107-32.

[13] Henry Staten, *Spirit Becomes Matter: The Brontës, George Eliot, Nietzsche* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 121.

[14] Suzanne Graver, "'Incarnate History': The Feminisms of *Middlemarch*," in Blake, *Approaches to Teaching Eliot's* Middlemarch, 69.

[15] I adapt this phrase (with concurrence) from Jeffrey J. Franklin, "Anthony Trollope Meets Pierre Bourdieu: The Conversion of Capital as Plot in the Mid-Victorian British Novel," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 31, no. 2, (2003): 510.

is itself a consequence of status: The pier glass, in which "scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles," is "made to be rubbed by a housemaid." The mistake of seeing a pattern where there is none crucially begins with the distance generated by class hierarchy. Overcoming status biases leaves you with no direction. The reality of multitudinous scratches has the authority of "the serene light of science" shed by an "eminent philosopher" who is also a "friend[]" (248), but the scientific reading too, observe, is undermined by Eliot's symbolic choices: the "light" of science is a parallel to the light of the candle which creates the illusion of concentricity, and stands the same risk of being eventually discovered as mere illusion. At Eliot's historical moment a grappling in the dark, one step at a time, is all there is. The web urges a principle of careful moves, each negotiating interpersonal differences with persons on whom you depend. Characters are right to engage in denial because opening up to dependencies exposes them fully to constraints. In what follows I pay more sustained attention to the terms of negotiation.

Negotiating the Web: Dependence and Difference

Beer draws out connections between the web metaphor and Darwin's work, and points to a passage in *The Origin of the Species* which is particularly important here:

> It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so *different* from each other, and *dependent* on each other in so complex a manner…(my emphasis)[16]

This imagery – incredibly widespread as Regenia Gagnier shows in her work on conceptions of individualism[17] – provided a way of seeing. It replaced the categories of social status with intricacies too complex to claim holistic views, and crucially, at once interdependent and different. Far from optimistic visions that political economic models and later evolutionary biology associated with this complexity, whereby the ever increasing differentiation resulting from the modern division of labor signaled

[16] Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* 1st ed. (London: John Murray, 1859), chap. 14.

[17] Regenia Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole*, 1859-1920 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

progress,[18] *Middlemarch* relied on promises to explore the unhappy implications of dependence and difference in the web.

> "It will be treating me as if I were a child. Promise that you will leave the subject to me."… and thus the discussion ended with his promising Rosamond, and not with her promising him. In fact, she had been determined not to promise… She meant to go out riding again… and she did go on the next opportunity of her husband's absence…(549).

Promissory struggles are the symbolic locus of Lydgate's and Rosamond's quickly deteriorating marriage. When Rosamond rides again Lydgate realizes that what he sees as "[h]is superior knowledge" is "set aside on every practical question" (549). The loss of Rosamond's baby, which Lydgate attributes to horse-riding and Rosamond insists was inevitable irrespectively, clarifies how unbridgeable the gap is, as contestation dominates over a common grief. The pattern repeats itself. When Lydgate wants to let their house Rosamond revokes his instructions to the auctioneer. Lydgate is again painfully amazed but she does not see his point:

> "It cannot be good to act rashly… Promise me that you will not go to him [auctioneer] for a few weeks, or without telling me" Lydgate gave a short laugh. "I think it is I who should exact a promise that you will do nothing without telling me" (620-21).

Lydgate's bitterness signals a new awareness of difference between him and Rosamond within a structure of mutual dependence. The marital unit, that "terribly inflexible relation" (621), is the par excellence case of interdependence in which irreconcilable difference yields suffocation. Daniel Malachuk suggests that marriage is a prime location of Eliot's development of a liberalism influenced by republican traditions of civic virtue, and particularly the notion of sociable individuals.[19] Marriage, however, is but an extreme form of a persistent condition of dependence within difference, fundamental to Eliot's resort to promises in the novel.

Depdendence within difference is a broad theme in *Middlemarch* scholarhsip, most extensively explored through work on sympathy, central to the novel's content as well as to Eliot's own

[18] For an account see ibid., chap. 1.
[19] Daniel S. Malachuk, "George Eliot's Liberalism," in *A Companion to George Eliot*, eds. Amanda Anderson and Harry E. Shaw (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2013), 370-84.

understanding of novels' ethical significance. Understood as form no less than content, sympathy points to relationality, premised on mutual dependencies, as a formal process undergirding literary realism. Rae Greiner for instance explains sympathy as a way of underwriting reality as a product of fellow feeling. The realist novel, she claims, prompts a particular imaginative experience: an intellectual and affective engagement which does not demand emotional identification but rather a "going along with" the mentalities of others – a term she derives from Adam Smith, whose *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is central to theories of sympathy in Victorian realism.[20] At once contextually minute and an abstract principle, sympathy is "the medium in which [microscopic transactions of exchange] take place."[21] Sympathy thus depends on relationality, ultimately enabling an integration into society by imagining worlds one does not inhabit.[22]

Greiner notes not only the role of interdependence but also the role of *difference* within the web of relations when she observes that sympathy does not deny individual separateness. Jean-Cristophe Agnew's reading of Adam Smith's concept of sympathy insists that difference was the crucial impulse in historical terms. "Fellow feeling was… a mark of immense distance that separated individual minds…",[23] hence the need for *imaginative* experience. Mutual sympathy, Agnew goes on, "sprang, paradoxically, out of realization of mutual inaccessibility."[24] Inaccessibility is the dominating experience of difference in the misery between Lydgate and Rosamond, and for all its pain was integral to Eliot's liberal outlook.

A short detour to cultural histories of late modern selfhood should allow us to recall the centrality of difference for liberal thinking more broadly and to clarify the specifics of Eliot's vision. As Charles Taylor tells the history of selfhood in *Sources of the Self*, in the late eighteenth century the idea of differences between individuals gained prominence. That individuals were different was nothing new, but now difference was no longer an unimportant variation on the same basic human nature; rather, each person's originality became crucial for how she ought to live: a moral source. The importance of

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[20] Rae Greiner, *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

[21] Ibid., 30. The bracketed words are from Ian Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), part of a discussion of the real in Adam Smith.

[22] Ablow argues for a significant continuity between realist form and idealized families, a claim speaking to the relationality (idealized relationality) of the form from a different direction. Rachel Ablow, *The Marriage of Minds: Reading Sympathy in the Victorian Marriage Plot* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

[23] Jean-Chrisophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 178. Kornbluh similarly emphasizes the self-interested projection involved in Smithian sympathy. Anna Kornbluh, *Realizing Capital: Financial and Psychic Economies in Victorian Form* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 83.

[24] Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, 179.

originality or uniqueness, together with the ideals based on disengaged reason, became the heart of modern identity.[25] Dror Wahrman confirms a similar historical turn through a diversified cultural investigation. On his account, toward the end of the eighteenth century something akin to a cultural revolution took place in England. Invoked into shape at the demise of the American war, a new regime of identity, or understanding of the self, emerged. Under the new regime identity came to mean that quintessential uniqueness that separates a person from all others, a regime of "*individual identity*." The new perception replaced abruptly the "ancien' regime of identity" based on "*intersubjective identicality*" that was in place during most of the eighteenth century. The ancien' regime was outward, or socially turned, more concerned with what persons had in common; ancien' regime identity was determined by a matrix of social relations.[26] These claims are in line with George Simmel, who identifies two kinds, or stages, of historical individualism in modernity. The nineteenth century was a second stage (after an earlier a focus on the individual/collectivity tension), with an individualism that ponders the differences between individuals and their qualitative peculiarities.[27]

The rise of difference has also specifically literary histories centered on characterization, that Deidre Lynch has called "the business of inner meaning." [28] The famous anchor for histories here is Ian Watt's classical study which associated the rise of the novel with the individualist emphasis on inner subjectivity.[29] As Lynch reminds us, the psychological depth of fictional characters is not simply an instance of novels giving literary form to ideologies, but rather a historical locus of action at which readers defined themselves relationally. On her analysis the pressure was on consumers to mark

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[25] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), *passim*, 375. See also Mauss's account of the historical emergence of the concept of the indivisible innate self in a long process reaching its peak toward the end of the eighteenth century. Marcel Mauss, "A Category of the Human Mind: The Notion of Person; the Notion of Self," in *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, eds. Michael Carruthers et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1-25. See generally Roy Porter, ed., *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: Routledge, 1997), for discussions of the historical emergence of modern selfhood.

[26] Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self*, 88.

[27] Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* 3rd ed., trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby, ed. David Frisby, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 362-63. See also Niklas Luhmann, *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986) for a similar periodization. And see Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978). Sennett argues that the belief in immanent facts in the nineteenth century, representing the second stage of secularization after the first stage of eighteenth-century belief in transcendental Nature, explains the emphasis on difference between individual personalities, which was taken to be the very basis of social existence.

[28] Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[29] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957). Lynch challenges his periodization and effectively offers a literary parallel to the cultural histories of selfhood just discussed; on her account, characterization understood as the representation of subjectivity only emerged from the 1770s, whereas earlier novels relied on types.

themselves as competent readers within an emerging mass commercial culture.[30] Audrey Jaffe highlights a different pressure, that of statistical thinking which drew readers into a finely-tuned analysis of averages and divergences from them to construe the locus of identity. *Middlemarch*, she says, epitomizes that construction of nineteenth century character.[31] Nancy Armstrong articulates the argument most broadly when she claims that the history of the novel and the history of the modern subject – who has interiority in excess of the social position (but, Jaffe would add, is only meaningful in reference to an average), are one and the same.[32]

Eliot's interest in the negotiation of differences between persons confirms the emphases of these histories. However, her no less intensive interest in interdependence as an ensuing consciousness, and the crucial assumption that individuals are not given but rather in a constant state of *becoming* through relationships, "altering with the double change of self and beholder" (88), offered a unique perspective. The self, on Eliot's account, is not a stable innate core, as Wharman insists in describing the modern regime of individual identity. To extend the many criticisms of the history of the innate self,[33] one might describe Eliotian selfhood by drawing on the old and new together, as "intersubjective identity." The self develops by being socially turned and outwardly oriented, yet its outwardness is oriented to individualized relationships rather than status-based social relations.

While intersubjective identity is a socially-turned vision of selfhood, it is not the kind of social vision that leftist criticism would espouse. Daniel Cottom, for instance, argues that representations of discrete relationships are not truly social but rather the mark of individuality discovered or evolved through experience.[34] In this exaltation of individuality, Cottom claims, liberal intellectuals – Eliot among them – were providing a metaphysics for the basic middleclass theory of economic and social practice. The intensive attention Eliot paid to the difficulty of isolating the individual is for Cottom a measure of the demand that the individual appear to be real and the real basis of all understanding, and so Eliot came

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[30] Lynch, *The Economy of Character*.

[31] Audrey Jaffe, *The Affective Life of the Average Man: The Victorian Novel and the Stock-Market Graph* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2010), chap. 1. Jaffe does argue that the common self is the consumer self who wants what others want. Ibid., 39-40.

[32] Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think: The Limits of British Individualism From 1719-1900* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

[33] E.g., Kate Flint addresses Taylor's argument (supra note 25 and accompanying text), and suggests that women's work problematizes the history of a stable idea of innate selfhood, posing a more social (gendered) model. Kate Flint, "'... As a Rule, I Does Not Mean I': Personal Identity and the Victorian Woman Poet," in Porter, *Rewriting the Self*, 156-66. Lynda Nead likewise discusses social space as an active part rather than passive backdrop to the formation of identity. Lynda Nead, "Mapping the Self: Gender, Space and Modernity in Mid-Victorian London," in Porter, *Rewriting the Self*, 167-85.

[34] Watt already articulated the claim that the obsession with relationships was a consequence of individualism, although his argument was also that relationships compensated for the undermining of status cohesions, "offering the individual a more conscious and selective pattern of social life…" Watt, *Rise of the Novel*, 177.

close to the abstract ideal of individuality.[35] As discussed in chapter 1, historical assessments of Victorian liberalism in contracts repeatedly point to the conceptual association between promise and the abstract ideal of individuality, and clarify its significance: The image of the abstract individual who was a rational market player did not represent a form of naïve blindness but rather an ambitious normative vision serviceable in a reorientation of social structures toward market paradigms.

While I concur with Cottom that Eliot was seeking to move beyond class, or more broadly status, the particular style of liberalism that she espoused cannot be collapsed with ideals of abstract individuality.[36] This is clearest when *Middlemarch's* promissory representations are examined; relying on promises as paradigms for countering dependence within difference, rather than expressing a predetermined innate self, Eliot elaborated a dynamic of becoming that was thoroughly socialized, but not in class or similarly broad ascriptive structures; the web was a socialization in relationships, a vision that requires historicization within the complexities of liberalism, rather than external critiques.

Alex Woloch's *The One vs. The Many* reveals the deep-reaching implications of relational becoming on the level of narrative structure. The "character system" in Woloch's terms is the overall structure of a novel (or any narrative) in which attention is asymmetrically allocated among different characters, each character occupying a *space* which frames the interaction between the implied individual and the overall narrative form. If characters do not always gain relationships in the plot, their character spaces, belonging to a single narrative structure, inevitably do. Characters depend on one another; in particular, the celebrated interior depth of novelistic characterization requires the distortions of its absence in minor characters. Woloch goes on to argue for the social meaning of the form, invoking two central concerns of the high era of realism: democracy and capitalism. With respect to both, the fact of representation of minor characters registers a dual sentiment: a pull toward inclusiveness, evident by the very appearance of multiplicity and social expansiveness in literary representation, and the failures of democracy and of capitalism, perhaps not just accepted but also reinforced by the existence of minor-ness, and by the distortions it produces for non-protagonists; on Woloch's account minor characters are ultimately the proletariat of the novel. To (mildly) apply Woloch's theory to his own work, observe that his attention to system and so to novels' distributive schemes leaves less theorized what is perhaps his central argument,

[35] Daniel Cottom, *Social Figures: George Eliot, Social History, and Literary Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

[36] See also Bigelow's argument that Eliot's intersubjective vision was resistant to atomistic individualism developed in neoclassical economics, particularly Jevons. Gordon Bigelow, "The Cost of Everything in *Middlemarch*," in *Economic Women: Essays on Desire and Dispossession in Nineteenth-Century British Culture*, eds. Lana L. Dalley and Jill Rappoport (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013),97-109.

namely that "the realist novel is structurally destabilized not by too many details… but by *too many people*."[37] To become distributive systems novels rely on the interdependencies of character spaces; these interdependencies are irreducible to a single repeated form but rather are endlessly variable, made of dynamic interactions, and so "the fictional individual gets elaborated in numerous ways."[38] This basis of character systems resonates with the vision of individuality in Eliot as a process of multiple interdependencies. Woloch's theory, in other words, reveals not just the way that literary form became homologous with large-scale social conditions of inequality in capitalism, but also how it performed a particular liberal ideology of individuality. This performance is possibly more radical than that of content, because on the level of the form the process of relational becoming does not leave behind even minor characters, who are left behind ("flat" or "undeveloped") in content.

Eliot's vision of selfhood as a dynamic becoming led to a concern that dominates *Middlemarch*: relational pressures might lead to annihilation of the self (again, concerns with minor-ness in terms of Woloch's theory seem to capture the point) no less than status-induced blindness which annihilates individual concreteness. Promises were uniquely placed to examine the problem of relational annihilation for they raised the classical liberal concern with voluntary submission, whereby persons, supposedly no longer constrained by statuses, gave up freedom through acts of will, precisely those acts supposed to represent the rule of freedom.

The classical Victorian articulation of the liberal concern with voluntary submission was in J.S. Mill's *On Liberty*. Mill justified legal and popular objections to the contract of slavery, the paradigm of voluntary submission: "The principle of freedom cannot require that he should be free not to be free" he argued, for such freedom defeats its own purpose.[39] His objection to the contract of slavery gave rise to generations of debate about paternalism; political and legal philosophy continues to debate whether Mill failed in sustaining his principle of self-sovereignty when he supported the social overriding of voluntary commitments which he himself described as concerning only the individual. However, framing the problem in terms of the classic antagonism between the social and the individual is little helpful in *Middlemarch* which concerns itself with the more nuanced second part of Mill's position: the inescapable submissions involved in everyday contexts, within the "less marked vicissitudes which are constantly shifting the boundaries of social intercourse" (88). Mill recognized that the logic of freely

[37] Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 19 (Woloch's emphasis).
[38] Ibid., 177.
[39] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Penguin Books, 1974) (1859), 173.

agreeing to not be free had a "far wider application" than slavery. Yet, he said, "a limit is everywhere set… by the necessities of life, which continually require, not indeed that we should resign our freedom, but that we should consent to this and the other limitation of it."[40] *Middlemarch* interrogated precisely such necessities of life, making mundane limitations on freedom far more central than the principle of liberty itself in its fictional world. While Mill moved on to ask about the liberty to retract from contracts, Eliot worried about the inescapability of living with them. In the struggle to articulate terms of action exceeding statuses, the fear was that there were no significant spaces for freedom. Eliot's liberalism constituted the relational subject whose achievement was rooted in compromise, attained first by the management of personal economies. The turn to economy to overcome suffocation and find meaning was at once bold and insecure, as I now turn to argue.

Compromise and Economic Wisdom

The final stage in the adjustment stories of *Middlemarch's* protagonists is figuratively tied with the final stage of the promissory stories, in which promissory obligation overwhelms each.

Lydgate bends to ask Bulstrode for a loan, and in an exasperating circumstantial twist involving him in Raffles' suspected murder, he brings his marriage and career to a near-breaking-point from which they never fully recover. With this over-straining of narrative causality, contractual debt has forced constraints on Lydgate not just practically but as a matter of perception. By all accounts "a successful man" (782) the narrator assures us, Lydgate nonetheless spent his life considering himself a failure.

Fred's debt too shakes him into full awakening. Remorse bites Fred when he faces Mary's parents, in a moment of intersubjectivity:

> [W]e are most of us brought up in the notion that the highest motive for not doing a wrong is something irrespective of the beings who would suffer the wrong. But at this moment he [Fred] suddenly saw himself as a pitiful rascal who was robbing two women of their savings (234).

The meaning of Fred's debt is now tied with concrete otherness. The reversal of self-reflex, which in Lydgate's case ends in sad disappointment, in Fred's story leads to salvation. Failure need not be the final experience; Eliot's emphasis instead was on the new awareness forced by the route of promissory obstacles.

[40] Ibid.

Lydgate's and Fred's contracted debts place demands on their consciousness which begin and end with economy. Lydgate, who began with disregard for small economies realizes that he should learn to count half-crowns. Compared to Rosamond, Lydgate is dynamic, willing to shed "habits" and deal with an unknown as if it is, indeed, unknown: "Having been roused to discern consequences which he had never been in the habit of tracing, he was preparing to act on this discernment with some of the rigour (by no means all) that he would have applied in pursuing experiment" (554). Lydgate's efforts to readjust bespeak a romantic version of popular household economy, whereby economizing is a route to material and spiritual independence which would reduce suffocation in the web.

The formal route that Lydgate seeks is Smilean self-help: "To secure independence," preached Samuel Smiles in his best seller, "the practice of simple economy is all that is necessary. Economy requires neither superior courage nor eminent virtue; it is satisfied with ordinary energy, and the capacity of average minds."[41] Lydgate is determined to stop the "wonderful… amount of money [that] slips away" in their housekeeping (610), a measure he indeed views as simple. His frustration is that indebtedness entangles him in "abject calculations" and makes him needy, as Smiles warned his readers lack of economy would. As Coleman notes, thrift was a requirement that underlay secular and religious manifestations of classical political economy alike, and was central to all its popularizers.[42] But Lydgate only understands how urgent economy is for him when there is no way out, for learning to economize comes with learning to understand Rosamond, no less of an experiment, and much less obliging.

Rosamond operates with a different economic consciousness, and counters Lydgate's thrifty ideas with two alternative economic plans: that Lydgate should ask his relatives for help, and that he should enlarge his practice by compromising his professional principles and indulging Middlemarch preferences, like sending out medicines. Lydgate dismisses her suggestions: "That is not the question between us" (611). It is just the question of course. Lydgate, once conscious of relational constraints, wants economy that would minimize them, while Rosamond remains obstinately committed to class practices; she proposes matching economic plans that take for granted social dependence in the traditional sense of status sociality, with always deferred economizing, and with social ascription determining action.

Fred gets to learn in time. He socializes into the Garth style of careful economies, his initiation involving disliked "desk-work" needed for him "to understand the accounts and get the values into [his]

[41] Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help: National and Individual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1859), 195, http://dl4a.org/uploads/pdf/Samuel%20Smiles%20-%20Self-Help%20-%20National%20and%20Individual.pdf
[42] Coleman, *George Eliot and Money*, 34.

head"(531). Fred learns to "be remarkably prudent, and save money every year" (778). The learning wins him the Featherstone estate that could not be gained through inheritance, and he is eventually successful as a "theoretic and practical" farmer, publishing "work on the 'Cultivation of Green Crops and the Economy of Cattle-Feeding'" (779). Fred does accounts only as a stepping stone from which to rise above the paradigmatic bourgeoisie desk upward to Eliot's espoused intellectual labor, and outward to romanticized agricultural labor. Fred and Lydgate learn, like average people, to think about money carefully so that they can be free from "money-craving" (609) – and so not think about money, as Smiles urged: "[Economy] does not make money an idol, but regards it as a useful agent."[43]; this would free them to self-realization, denied to Lydgate but achieved by Fred who is saved from being "a curate in debt for horse-hire and cambric pocket-handkerchiefs," that is, from the suffocation of social-status dependencies which must also lead to the wrong profession.

In a reversal of Lydgate's trajectory flowing from inability to economize, Fred's economizing, described by Garth as soul saving (531), wins for him aspired love and career of the kind that Lydgate had lost. The importance of inverse trajectories is pressed on readers when Fred observes their "strange reversal of attitudes" (632). Fred could well enter Smiles' endless lists of exemplary men, while Lydgate lives to regret that he never could.

Economizing is recognized by Lydgate and Fred as a procedural way out of a conundrum that Franco Moretti finds in Eliot's work: He argues that Eliot espoused the Weberian paradigm that opposed "vocation" as a depersonalized sphere to "everyday life" and maintained that one must be sacrificed to the other.[44] In invoking the advice of Smiles, "[t]he mid-Victorian embodiment of… respect for self-command at a practical and daily level,"[45] Eliot sought ways of reconciling the daily with the vocational. Lydgate and Fred practice economy, or want to practice it, so as to avoid sacrifice and become ideal persons of political economy whose labor is properly a source of value, not just economic but spiritual.

But Eliot was far from certain that economic advice could carry the weight of re-hallowing life without the aid of an overt religious ethic,[46] possibly even in opposition to Christianity's too-strict demands[47]; she heeded the advice without the celebratory tones. The boldness of her effort came to the test in Dorothea's plot. As with Lydgate and Fred, here too Eliot led Dorothea at the last stage of her

[43] Smiles, *Self-Help*.
[44] Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (New York: Verso, 2000), 216-21.
[45] John R. Reed, *Victorian Will* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1989), 10.
[46] On Eliot's implicit alliance with a Christian pattern of renunciation as freedom see ibid., chap. 15.
[47] As Blumberg suggests in her reading of midcentury novels. Ilana M. Blumberg, *Victorian Sacrifice: Ethics and Economics in Mid-Century Novels* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2013).

adjustment story toward economizing. However, gendered oppositions disrupted the trajectory which appears pretty simple, even reductive, with Lydgate and Fred. Dorothea's story exposed both the role of economizing at the heart of *Middlemarch's* liberal vision, and Eliot's insecurity that it worked. To see how, we should follow through the breakdown of the pattern whereby promissory obligation reveals relational suffocations – and economizing signals relief.

While the promissory stories of Fred and Lydgate drive their process of adjustment from the start, with Dorothea the promise appears at a late stage, representing a high point in the difficult acknowledgement of her distance from Casaubon's "centre of self" (198). Casaubon's demand arrives when Dorothea is at once as involved in his work as she had hoped, and conscious of its futility. The problem is not the force of a promise to the dead as sometimes argued[48] but rather the lived process of Dorothea's relational becoming; the literary device of empty promise shifts attention from its content to Dorothea's problem. She has come to appreciate her difference from Casaubon concretely as confinement, but still finds it difficult to part with her devotional ideals. Causabon's death is not the end of the process. To finally refuse requires placing the promise on a level with those of Fred and Lydgate, a nontrivial feat that Eliot achieved through Casaubon's will.

Postmortem, the deathbed promise obtains unimagined content: Dorothea assumed that Casaubon wanted to engage her in his scholarship, but the codicil tells her that Casaubon worried about Will. Conditioning her inheritance on not marrying Will, the codicil forces a shift of focus from an elevated devotion of efforts that characterized Dorothea's misconceived marriage, to a personalized place for money. In a revealing move, Eliot reduced Dorothea's drama to the banality of her male protagonists, locating the problem of relational suffocation at the level of economy. She was explicit about her move: Lydgate's debts, representing "small solicitations of circumstance" (736), like Fred's "miserably small" debts (111), are "a commoner history of perdition than any single momentous bargain" (736). As Henry James summarized Lydgate's story, "It is a tragedy based on unpaid butchers' bills, and the urgent need for small economies."[49] The novel's meaning develops through small economies, and so Dorothea gets there too.

Dorothea's promissory plot ends not when Casaubon dies but when she remarries. In uniting with Will, Dorothea effectively refuses at last the promise requested by Casaubon, bringing to a pitch her process of adjustment. In consequence, she is not just resigned but astoundingly excited to embrace the

[48] E.g., Melissa J. Ganz, "Binding the Will: George Eliot and the Practice of Promising," *ELH* 75, no.3 (2008): 565-602
[49] Patrick Swinden, ed., *George Eliot, Middlemarch: A Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1972), 60, 65 (citing Henry James, *Galaxy*, March 1873).

threat of the codicil and become a woman who learns what everything costs. On its face, Dorothea's economizing is one with Fred's and Lydgate's: she finally says NO to Casaubon and so reduces the implications of relational suffocation. Dorothea's economizing brings her story to level with Fred and Lydgate as persons who understand what it means to truly be *in* the world, finally comprehending constraints implied by interdependence within difference and working through them. Dorothea's other-worldliness is definitively overcome.[50]

However, Dorothea's move does not work well because her way of being *in* the world shrinks her existence. She gives up the position of benevolent patron of social justice to become an economizing person. Critics have offered various explanations for her choice. Dorothea's union with Will might, for instance, be consistent within Kantian ethics, or be read as a turn away from Christian asceticism which requires extreme self-denial toward middle grounds.[51] The novel itself suggests Dorothea had little choice because gender oppression undermined her subversive economics. At the opening of the novel Brooke dismisses Dorothea's economic plans because "Young ladies don't understand political economy" (16). As Anna Kornbluh shows, the novel took pains to contrast her expansive vision with Smithian political economy.[52] Dorothea's schemes clearly posed a challenge to classical political economy and had therefore been consistently thwarted by the men around her before and after Casaubon. In desperation she tries to study directly the dismal science, only to find that she cannot:

> She sat down in the library before her particular little heap of books on political economy… trying to get light as to the best way of spending money so as not to injure one's neighbors, or – what comes to the same thing – so as to do them the most good… Unhappily her mind slipped off it for a whole hour; and at the end she found herself reading sentences twice over with an intense consciousness of many things, but not of any one thing contained in the text. This was hopeless. (756)

By this point male oppression has led to complete alienation: Dorothea lacks access to language that would frame her ideas; the sentences stir. She is at a loss when Will appears on the scene which ends with their union in the immortal "and I will learn what everything costs" (762). Dorothea endorses

[50] As Gallagher notes, Dorothea also achieves embodiment. Gallagher, "George Eliot: Immanent Victorian."
[51] Respectively, Coleman, *George Eliot and Money*; Blumberg, *Victorian Sacrifice*, chap. 3 (I am adapting Blumberg's claims with regard to *Adam Bede*).
[52] Kornbluh, *Realizing Capital*, chap. 3. See also Coleman's suggestion that the theory would require that investments of the kind she proposes should command an increase in rent, Coleman, *George Eliot and Money*, 96.

personal economizing as a way out of the gendered constraints which made her economic ideas inoperable and finally inaccessible even to herself.[53]

These explanations clarify Dorothea's turn from public to private, but do not capture the reason that the turn fails to work; after all, *Middlemarch* like other novels repeated the privatizing maneuver incessantly in its search for existential meaning in everyday life. What undermines the coherence of Dorothea's story is not the replacement of private for public in itself but rather that Dorothea's embrace of the private relies on turning *to* economizing, rather than recognizing economizing as a procedure leading to greater things. Economizing *is* her union with Will: it is consummated in learning what everything costs, in a moment that confirms in the extreme Nancy Henry's argument that for Eliot all relationships are also economic relationships.[54] Economizing becomes an end in itself, replacing rather than enabling benevolence. This structure unsettles the logic of economizing, and more broadly of the private-public dialectic whereby private deeds of duty make the world go round, espoused in the plots of Fred and Lydgate.

The difficulty of moving *to* rather than *from* economizing explains why Dorothea's and Will's union is a famously anticlimactic scene which has exasperated generations of readers. Eliot had built toward it throughout the novel, but in frustrating the basic logic of her plot she halted the sexual and emotional excitement that should have offered a sense of closure, and no thunderbolts in background could recharge the scene. Kornbluh sees the thunderbolts as part of an artifice which calls attention the problematic of Dorothea's compromise.[55] The point is not the compromise in itself, but the way it signals a subversion of a logic otherwise informing the plot, whereby you pay a price to attain something better. Economizing becomes not a solution to suffocation but part of the problem. This was a failure of closure. *Middlemarch's* finale was a second attempt to achieve it.

In the novel's famed ending, Dorothea achieves effects which are "incalculably diffusive" (785): in the last moment, with a rhetorical trick rather than narrated detail, Eliot wanted to free her female protagonist too from calculation for the greater good by virtue of economizing; she replaced the romanticized commitment to always calculate made in the union scene, with incalculability. Yet, success here depends on quick forgetfulness: incalculability was part of a finale that finalizes almost nothing, as

[53] As Andrew Miller points out, economizing, and cutting down on dresses, is also a way out of another gendered constraint, that of avoiding a commodified subjectivity which threatened women. Andrew Miller, *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), ch. 6.
[54] Nancy Henry, "George Eliot and Finance" in Anderson and Shaw, *A Companion to George Eliot*, 330.
[55] Kornbluh, *Realizing Capital*, 87.

Hillis Miller observes,[56] not even rhetorically. Just before Dorothea's incalculability, Eliot confirmed that it was the consequence of her being "absorbed into the life of another" (783); she invoked again status oppressions – a point I examine further in the next chapter, and so undermined Dorothea's turn to private economy as meaningful. For all her efforts, with Dorothea Eliot seemed unable to close the gap between "small economies" and existential meaningfulness. Dorothea achievements remain equivocal.

Kornbluh concludes that *Middlemarch's* equivocations sounded a warning about the fatality of the burgeoning capitalist economy.[57] The sounding of warning, however, is also often a way of living in peace with what you should resist with might, as Dorothea once wanted to. Eliot's socialized capitalist order of relational dependencies offered a "diffusive" sense of hope that you could embrace without thereby being the fool who does not realize all the suffocations involved. As Martijn Konings says, "[c]apitalist socialization involves productive admixtures of hope and disappointment, illusion and disillusion."[58] Kornbluh acutely studies Eliot's use of parabasis – moments in which the narrator stands beside the text to comment on it, as a formal performance of the irony of the novel's own alliances with capitalist solutions. Yet this "standing beside" enables *Middlemarch*. To exist unrevolutionarily – and successfully – within the capitalist order without being naïve is the paradoxical consciousness that haunts many still.

Limiting Masculinity in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

Eliot's interest in suffocations, Williams suggested, bespoke the beginnings of what we still call a modern consciousness. Fifteen years later Hardy was more clearly there. He was far more apprehensive than Eliot and lacked confidence in the possibility of liberation,[59] an outlook I want to examine through the problem of masculinity in contracts.

When contracts historians think about the patriarchal dimensions of modern contract law, the focus is often the place of women in political and economic life. Feminist contracts histories explore the broad spectrum of contracts involving female sexuality directly, from marriage to prostitution. From the perspective of contract as a general category, there have been two main focal points: the doctrinal logic of coverture, which denied married women's contractual capacity, and the ideology of separate spheres,

[56] J. Hillis Miller, "A Conclusion in Which Almost Nothing is Concluded: *Middlemarch's* Finale," in Chase, *Middlemarch in the Twenty First Century*, 133-56.
[57] She is concerned specifically with financial capitalism.
[58] Martijn Konings, *The Emotional Logic of Capitalism: What Progressives Have Missed* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 62.
[59] Williams, *The English Novel*, 88.

which confined women to the domestic sphere, delimiting the imagination of their relevant contractual agency(ies) while the market was elaborated in contradistinction. The center of concern and debate in its broadest articulation is that the very notion of freedom to enter contracts is masculine because, as Carol Pateman argues, the individual is a patriarchal category.[60] It has become a critical commonplace to associate paradigms of abstract rationality, autonomy, and competitive action in liberal theory generally, and more specifically in contracts, with male prerogatives: "[A] correlation between the characteristics of masculinity and the ethos and philosophy of classical legal doctrine has been central to feminist engagements with the law."[61] Feminist histories have been struggling uphill in two directions, often in apparent tension but in fact fully complementary: to read women back into history and recover the limits of formal legal and ideological discourses in historical realities, and yet to reconstruct and explain the sources of women's disempowerment.

I have discussed some of the implications of contracts' masculinity for women in the previous chapter and return to them in chapter 5, but in this chapter I want to look at what it meant for men by reading Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. The novel's remarkable achievement is not merely in recognizing the centrality of masculinity in contracts, but in problematizing it as an operative model in the world of modern capitalism. Published at the outskirts of high Victorianism and located at the margins of realism, Hardy's tale, I argue, examined the masculinity of contracts as itself a form of unrealistic constraint, a ruinous imperative underwriting the novel's structure of tragedy.

Brief reminder: *The Mayor of Casterbridge* was one of Hardy's Wessex series. The novel opens with Michael Henchard selling his wife Sue and their daughter Elizabeth-Jane in a rural fair under rum intoxication. When Henchard wakes up the next morning his wife and child are gone. After months of futile search he settles in the rural town of Casterbridge. Sue and her daughter arrive in Casterbridge nineteen years later to discover that Henchard is the town's mayor and a prominent hay and corn merchant. On the same day the Scottish Donald Fafrae too arrives. Henchard befriends and hires Farfrae to manage his business, and remarries Sue. While Casterbridge begins to experience industrialization, things deteriorate for Henchard on all fronts. Sensing his disadvantage with Farfrae, Henchard drives him out and eventually loses all positions to him: Farfrae opens a successful competing business while Henchard's business fails and is eventually bought by Farfrae, together with Henchard's house and his furniture; Farfrae also becomes the town's mayor, and marries Hanchard's old lover Lucetta.

[60] Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).
[61] Linda Mulcahy, "The Limitations of Love and Altruism – Feminist Perspectives on Contract Law," in *Feminist Perspectives on Contract Law*, eds. Linda Mulcahy and Sally Wheel (London: Glasshouse Press, 2005), 1.

Concurrently, Sue dies and Henchard discovers that his daughter too had died young and that Elizabeth is the daughter of Sue's buyer; he drives Elizabeth out too, and comes to miss her. Lucetta dies after her past with Henchard is discovered. Elizabeth, whom Henchard only just wins back, marries Farfrae, and Henchard dies a poor outcast.

My reading of the novel proceeds through a number of arguments. First I examine the opening scene of wife sale. The sale stands in temporal and stylistic distance from the rest of the narrative which plots Henchard's downfall, yet foretells it not just causally but symbolically, for the problem throughout is the performance of masculinity in capitalism. Hardy's plotting of wife sale, I argue, invoked the theme of masculinity in contracts in the starkest way possible, while also already hinting at the necessary victimization of men.

I then turn to the downfall plot, in which Farfrae appears as Henchard's foil – a projection of Henchard without the rigid masculine debasement. A crucial starting point that becomes clear only with Farfrae in view is that Henchard is caught up in a masculinity that he does not fully own, a compulsory masculinity (a concept I explain in a moment), which the novel underlines and motivates by giving Henchard an aberrant sexuality. Possibly a homosexual, Henchard is driven to exhibit masculine excesses that secure his downfall. In particular, the excesses implicate his promissory discourse and conduct. Enacting a formally strict version of atomistic individualism, Henchard insists on will and choice in disregard of constraints, while his foil exhibits the exact opposite sensibility; Farfrae is particularly sensitive to relational concerns, and so thrives in the industrializing setting of the novel while Henchard becomes increasingly detached from it. Farfrae represents a refined version of modern rationality which rejects atomism in favor of relational sociality. Hardy, however, was hardly impressed with the historical change hence, I will argue in conclusion, the tragic form.

I use "compulsory masculinity" to gesture at the way *The Mayor of Casterbridge* represents Henchard's performance of an atomistic contractual logic as an unchosen, historically constituted imperative which he recognizes from a distance as it were. Far from having a protagonist embodying the normative ideal of masculinity naturally, the ideal is exposed as ideological and socially mandated, demanding a performance forced on the body as much as on social interaction. The term of course invokes Adrienne Rich's work,[62] helpful here not only for the theory of identities as enforced norms

[62] Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631-60.

which might work to the detriment of their bearers, but also for a more specific reason that will be clear when I discuss Henchard's wife sale below.

Overall, the novel's treatment of contracts is important in a number of distinct senses. First, it provides a literary articulation of atomistic individualism in contracts as a construct gendered at the core. Second, it implies that the masculine identity at stake is a victimizing cultural imperative. This outlook compensates for a particular blindspot in contracts histories, which (unlike theory) have read the gender of contracts from the perspective of women's exclusions, and have too often left the positive content of contract – its inclusions, to nongendered readings. Finally, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* suggested that the failure of the male contractual identity is a consequence of contracts' relationality, which emerges as the determining factor for prosperity in an industrializing world. This point moves the debate about gender beyond the historical claim that contract remained wedded to statuses, particularly gender, and opens up another angle on Victorian relational conceptualizations of contracts.

Wife Sale

The Mayor of Casterbridge's concern with the masculinity of contracts is flagged in the novel's brutal opening scene, in which Henchard auctions and sells Sue. The sale is the first and looming failure in the plot of Henchard's fall as well as an encapsulation of the fall's logic.

Wife sales were illegal,[63] and widely considered rare, yet, as E.P. Thompson argued in his classic study of the history of wife sales, at stake was a ritualized plebian practice. Thompson identified 176 "authentic cases" between 1800 and 1880, with a notable decline from midcentury.[64] The data's relation to the volume of actual incidences remains contested, with some historians arguing that sales were decidedly marginal.[65] Controversy about the probability of the plot began soon after the novel's publication.[66] Hardy insisted in his preface to a later edition that had based the narrative on a real event. The question of historical significance has been tied with the controversy about the interpretation of wife sales, which carries implications for reading Hardy's fictionalization.

[63] For a discussion see Sandra Berns, "Women in English Legal History: Subject (almost), Object (irrevocably), Person (not quite)," *University of Tasmania Law Review* 12, no.1 (1993): 37 n.31, 38; Julie C. Suk, "The Moral and Legal Consequences of Wife Selling in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*," in *Subversion and Sympathy: Gender, Law and the British Novel*, eds. Martha C. Nussbaum and Alison LaCroix, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 27-47.
[64] E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: Penguin 1991), chap. 7.
[65] For a conclusion that sales were insignificant see Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce: England 1530-1987* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 148.
[66] Shanta Dutta, "Hardy and his Mayor: A Gendering of Critical Response," *The Thomas Hardy Journal* 19, no. 2 (2003): 33-40, reviews the controversy.

Thompson interpreted wife sales as a form of divorce for the poor, often with the consent of the wife. His reading met with scathing feminist critiques that he partly conceded in saying, "One cannot always be reiterating the elemental organisation of a society and its gender relations..."[67] The controversy between Thompson and his feminist critics was but an instance of an ongoing debate between functional accounts which associate sales with divorce needs of the poor within an unobliging legal and economic context, and critical assessments of sales as marks of patriarchy.

Read against the controversy, I suggest that Hardy's representation emphasized patriarchy over functionalist explanations. As Thompson himself argued, while Hardy's novel was a "powerful influence" asserted against indifference to wife sales, it was too stereotyped in its representation to match the ritual process of divorce. The details of the ritual, explains Lawrence Stone, were designed to emphasize the final nature of the separation and ensure community legitimation to a prearranged agreement.[68] Hardy's scene was lacking just there. Ritualized features, including the memorable use of a halter, are missing from Sue's sale, and most crucially, there is no preplanning. The buyer is a stranger, Henchard impulsive, senseless from drinking, and Sue, far from an active participant, is a victim who has met with the threat of sale in the past, and when it finally materializes proves to be the archetype of objectified consciousness: "I dared not desert him when he had paid so much for me in good faith"(73), she reflects back on her sale.

Thompson assumed that Hardy relied on middleclass newspaper reports which framed sales as low-class brutality, hence the misrepresentation.[69] However, the effect runs too deep into the novel's logic to be dismissed at that: the masculine logic of Henchard's promises will animate his downfall. The sale is a narrative benchmark in line with Pateman's point: Hardy's scene is a graphic illustration of sexual subordination as the core of contract.[70] As Elaine Showlater argued in an article which inaugurated the discussion of masculinity in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, the sale expressed women's subjugation in capitalism. Yet, within the novel's overall structure the point was not women's predicament as such – indeed from Sue's perspective there's a case to be made of the sale's benefits – but rather the backlash

[67] Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 458.
[68] Stone, *Road to Divorce*, 143-48.
[69] Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 404-05; Suk, " Moral and Legal Consequences," 35-36.
[70] See Pateman's discussion of its relation to slavery, Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, 121. See also Ann Heilmann, "Marriage," in *Thomas Hardy in Context*, ed. Phillip Mallett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 354. Heilmann argues that Sue is an extreme representation of marriage as sexual trafficking.

on men.[71] The novel's opening scene is a narration of masculine excess that will prove victimizing for Henchard for its disregard of relational constraints.[72]

Henchard's conduct is notably crude, intended to unsettle readers:

> For my part I don't see why men who have got wives and don't want 'em, shouldn't get rid of 'em as these gipsy fellows do their old horses… Why shouldn't they put 'em up and sell 'em by auction to men who are in need of such articles? Hey? Why, begad, I'd sell mine this minute if anybody would buy her! (11)

The conversation continues with male evaluations of Sue which treat her as if she were indeed an old horse, not least the narrator himself who says that Sue "was by no means ill-favoured" (11). Julie Suk argues that the scene begins as chattel sale, but with Sue's cooperation becomes a divorce and remarriage, thus offering a complex and uncertain picture of the sale's meaning.[73] Sue's consent, however, is prompted by her rising despair as Henchard ignores her implorations to stop; the consent operates to underline her humiliation, "the harshness of the act just ended" (15) and the beginning of backlash.

Hardy created a scene of female humiliation through contract in which Henchard acts out of his senses. Regretful Henchard will soon take a vow of temperance for twenty-one years (his age at the sale), the implication being that he would not otherwise have acted as he did. However, Henchard's miserable, formally self-inflicted and perfectly sober downfall before the end of the set term, in which additional promissory junctions play part, reveals a different implication: the compulsion is not alcohol but rather a standard of masculinity that Henchard performs too strictly, to his own detriment.

The sale is set apart from the downfall plot in time – nineteen years, and in style – narrated with more distance than is used afterwards in the novel. Without broaching the vexed question of omniscience in Hardy's work, it is worth observing that in the downfall plot the narration often aligns with characters' viewpoints, while the sale is narrated strictly from afar, perhaps the clearest case of what Hillis Miller

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[71] Elaine Showlater, "The Unmanning the Mayor of Casterbridge," in *Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Dale Kramer, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1979), 99-115.

[72] This argument differs from emphases on familial relations, for example of Showlater, ibid., and Armstrong, *How Novels Think*, 98. My argument focuses on the demands of modern capitalism specifically, as they materialize in Farfrae. Henchard does not change to accommodate relationality but instead assumes that the other side of aggressive willfulness is annihilation.

[73] Suk, "Moral and Legal Consequences."

has called a "superficiality of consciousness."[74] And yet, both Hardy's play with narrative duration and with style make the sale the causal and symbolic generator of the downfall plot.

The nineteen years after the sale are the rise of Henchard as merchant and mayor. As George Levine argues, these years are Henchard's assertion of the absolute power of his self.[75] Henchard moves from poor hay-trusser to the heart of middleclass gentlemanliness as if in a liberal fairytale gone wild. His brutal contractual gesture miraculously translates into the core requirement of Victorian normative masculinity: as I explain below, the requirement is achievement attained through energetic effort, a hard-attained self-mastery, formally gestured in Henchard's vow of temperance, itself in line with popular advice to the lower classes.[76] Hardy's ellipsis, however, belittles the significance of the prosperous years; the plot turns directly to the downfall, before the term of the vow is over, insisting that the masculinity of contract, brutal in its low-class articulation and attractive when performed as middleclass energy, is one and the same. Further ellipses of shorter periods maintain the connection between the sale and other narrative events. These allow for retrospective gap-filling, completing the dramatic effect of the contract.

When the sale is revealed it haunts all corners of Henchard's environment anew:

> The amends he [Henchard] had made in after life were lost sight of in the dramatic glare of the original act… the act having lain as dead and buried ever since, the interspace of years was unperceived; and the black spot of his youth wore an aspect of a recent crime (218).

[74] On Miller's argument, Hardy's and his characters' self-awareness is always involved in their awareness of the world. As a result there is no recognition of the intrinsic quality of the mind; the habitual stance of the narrator is of detachment which sees events from above them or from a time long after they have happened. J. Hillis Miller, *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970). Miller relates Hardy's style to a late nineteenth century scientific objectivism in which human significance was eroded.

For additional discussions of Hardy's omniscience see for example Linda Shires, "'And I Was Unaware': The Unknowing Omniscience of Hardy's Narrators," in *Thomas Hardy: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Phillip Mallett (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 31-48. Shires argues that Hardy questioned omniscience even as he relied on it, and was content with moments of not knowing. See also Neil Powell, "Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*," in *British Writers Classics, Vol. 2*, ed. Jay Parini (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2004), 183. Powell suggests that the novel's narration is "only patchily omniscient" for "we do not have a full interior sense of Henchard." Norman Page, *Thomas Hardy: The Novels* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), calls Hardy's narration observant rather than omniscient.

[75] George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 243-46.

[76] Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution 1789-1848* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), chap. 11.

Presentiation, explained Ian Macneil, "is a recognition that the course of the future is so unalterably bound by present conditions that the future has been brought effectively into the present so that it may be dealt with just as if it were in fact the present."[77] Macneil explained the role of promises in helping people presentiate – reduce future choices.[78] With Sue's sale contract, the novel dramatizes a reverse presentiation: It denies the crucial assumption of control through promises which it marks as a masculine fallacy; instead, not only does the text stretch the future beyond the control of the promissory moment, it allows the future to redefine the meaning of the present, negating all but the future's backlash.[79]

Even before readers read on, the sale scene itself speaks to the paradoxical meaning of compulsory masculinity which victimizes men, supposedly the gainers of modern gender constructions. When Rich elaborated Kathleen Gough's characteristics of male power, under the characteristic entitled "*to use them [women] as objects in male transactions*" she listed a host of things, the first four of which were "use of women as 'gifts'; bride-price; pimping; arranged marriages…"[80] Each of these arguably captures elements of a wife sale, but not fully its implications. Missing in all of these options is the husband's pain. A wife sale, for all its gender brutality, is always on some level also painful because all visions of marriage, including the most patriarchal, implicate also the husband's identity to conceptualize the marital relation; whether the implication emphasizes psychological, social or theological elements of the union is less crucial than the simple point that a parting with your wife cannot be entirely a matter of indifference. Henchard too experiences pain, which is integral to the novel's plot. This complexity in the specific category of wife sales, different from other forms of trafficking in women, serves the project of examining compulsory masculinity as victimization of the empowered contractor. The remainder of the plot will get in closer touch with the meaning of men's victimhood so as to close the distance between the opening scene of wife sale narrated from afar and the nearer narration of downfall.

Wearing Masculinity Like a Costume

Henchard's deviant sexuality has long been observed by readers. He is not only a misogynist, as he openly confesses (78), he is also uninterested in sex with women: "I solemnly declare that philandering

[77] Ian Macneil, "Contracts: Adjustment of Long-Term Economic Relations Under Classical, Neoclassical, and Relational Contract Law," *Northwestern University Law Review* 72, no. 6 (1978): 863.
[78] Ian Macneil, "Restatement (Second) of Contracts and Presentiation," *Virginia Law Review* 60, no.4 (1974): 592.
[79] These add up to my discussion in the Introduction warning against too quick a collapse of the relational vision of contract emerging here with Macneil's relational contract theory.
[80] Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," 639.

with womankind has neither been my vice nor my virtue" (79). On the other hand he is attracted to Farfae. "[H]ow that fellow does draw me" (57) he says to himself, and soon to Farfrae: [W]hen a man takes my fancy he takes it strong" (65). Farfrae "could play upon him as on an instrument" (274). Possibly a repressed homosexual,[81] Henchard at least displays an open rejection of normative heterosexual drives, at a felt tension – or perhaps ancient alliance – with his physique which is mythically male. He is a "stern a piece of virility" (274), of "heavy frame, large features, and commanding voice" (34).

Henchard's attraction to Farfrae leads to his spontaneous confession of his secret past, and so makes him, on his own understanding, vulnerable. In a quick reversal he therefore turns the friendship into an all-fronts competition of manliness. The competition involves symbolic scenes linking it with Henchard's insecure sexual identity, including a comparing of erections (in the form of town entertainments)[82] on Henchard's part, and a wrestling match. When the match ends Henchard is unable to hurt Farfrae; instead he confesses his love: "no man ever loved another as I did thee at one time" (273-74), and is left without sense of manliness: "[s]o thoroughly subdued… that he remained on the sacks in a crouching attitude, unusual for a man, and for such a man. Its womanliness sat tragically on [his] figure…" (274). Henchard realizes that Farfrae's appreciation remains his driving force: "my heart is true to you still!" (286)

The Mayor of Casterbridge was written in years in which conceptions of masculinity, particularly as they emerged from domestic ideology, were under strain. While, as John Tosh observes, to say that the ideology was in crisis would be a wild exaggeration, it was under enough pressure to allow Hardy, himself uncomfortable with demands of masculinity, to use his protagonist's sexuality to challenge the masculine discourse of control.[83] Henchard's distance from normative sexuality pushes him to an over-strained performance of atomistic individualism's assumptions in contract and becomes a predicament within an unobliging context.

[81] As Jones insists: Tod E. Jones, "Michael Henchard: Hardy's Male Homosexual," *Victorian Newsletter* 86 (1994): 9-13.
[82] As Jones notes, ibid., 12.
[83] John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 160. On Hardy's relation to masculinity see Margaret R. Higonnet, "Hardy and His Critics: Gender in the Interstices," in *A Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. Keith Wilson (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 117-29; Elizabeth Langland, "Hardy and Masculinity," in Mallett, *Thomas Hardy in Context*, 374-83.

Contracting Like a Man

Henchard seizes symbols of normative masculinity almost with despair, particularly acts of will. His vow is a first act of control through will. The nineteen years of ellipsis deny the effectiveness of this act and the scheme crashes. The marks of the fall are then represented in promissory overload, that is, a multitude or clash of contracts which typically involve assumptions that contract is a realm of control. Henchard attempts to tame chance with contractual rationality, and to treat contract as a circumscribed realm of formal rights and duties, and so iterates the idea of isolated human agency through contract. His performance marks a continuing crisis

The opening promissory overload in the downfall plot concerns Henchard's business. He had supplied bad corn "in his contracts" (37) and caused a severe shortage of food supplies in the town. He refuses to replace the grown flour, arguing that the risk passed on to his customers (38). His customers, he says, "must make allowances for the accidents of a large business… You must bear in mind that the weather just at the harvest of that corn was worse than we have known it for years" (38). Henchard's defense is a symbolic attempt to tame chance, in this case, natural forces; he speaks as if nature is digestible within the contractual allocation of risks. Observe that while such moments in the novel invoke directly the Victorian debate on determinism and chance,[84] Hardy's concern was ultimately elsewhere: Henchard ignores a more direct source of predicament, namely, the fury of his customers, and that move, we shall see, marks him apart from Farfrae whose inverse trajectory occurs under the same natural conditions. The scene of customer outrage is a public dinner in which social relations determine the sitting at the table; the setting speaks to the interdependencies of which Henchard should be sensible: his contracts are inseparable from the socio-political setting.

Farfrae's position as foil begins here as he duly arrives to suggest a solution that saves Henchard. Farfrae performs a sensitive, relational and at the same time heterosexual masculinity, an alternative model to Henchard's, suited to the emergent capitalism depicted in the plot. Before I explain further the models of masculinity at stake, it is worth adding yet another example to the picture.

A second promissory overload concerns Farfrae's engagement as manager of Henchard's business. The contract contradicts a promise Henchard had already made to another candidate, Joshua Jopp. When Jopp arrives Henchard bluntly says that Farfrae is the new manager and explains he engaged him since Jopp had not kept their Thursday appointment. Jopp presents Henchard's letter which named Thursday

[84] See e.g., Ian Hacking, "Nineteenth Century Cracks in the Concept of Determinism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44, no. 3(1983): 455-75.

or Saturday as the appointment days, but Henchard replies: "well, you are too late" (66) and denies that he engaged Jopp, arguing that the engagement was subject to an interview. Henchard uses formal contractual reasoning to explain away his responsibility for a promissory failure, leaping with no little legalistic intuition from one defense to another. However, once again this is not the end of the story: The rationalist imperative, which uses formalities to cover for Henchard's attraction to Farfrae, meets Jopp's bitterness which returns to haunt Henchard on several occasions. The peak is Jopp's exposure of Lucetta's secret letters which leads to her death; this undoes a redeeming moment for Henchard, for Henchard only just promised to keep her secret.[85]

It is important to see that Hardy was not moralizing about promise keeping; instead he underlined Henchard's failure to carve contractual behavior and discourse to contextual constraints. Henchard's impossible position begins with the contingent set of circumstances which brought Farfrae to him in the interim period between the letter to Jopp and Jopp's arrival, and its meaning is determined by relational responses, yet Henchard refuses to acknowledge this picture, claiming instead to master the situation through formalities.

Henchard's model of control converses with a set of expectations that might be described as the conventional model of Victorian middleclass masculinity. While working-class masculine identities tended to be multiple and local, historians claim more hegemony in the middle- and upper classes, achieved through the consumption of common cultural products, among them attending the same educational institutions and reading the same periodicals and novels which both taught and authorized manliness.[86]

Demands of conventional masculinity issued most pressingly from the domestic sphere, a point which historians interested in complicating the public/private divide emphasize. As Tosh argues, the home as a privileged site of subjectivity in the Victorian era was integral to masculinity.[87] Ben Griffin highlights a curious starting point for many of the demands of masculinity in the public world: the Victorian obsession with the avoidance of marital discord in the home. At stake in masculinity, then, was Victorian domestic ideology. That ideology was made up of religious ideas which from the end of

[85] Or maybe he meant the exposure, because the continued traffic in women, and the implicit relation established through Lucetta between him and Farfrae are more essential in his promises. For the argument that Henchard wanted the exposure see Deanna K. Kreisel, *Economic Woman: Demand, Gender, and Narrative Closure in Eliot and Hardy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 170.
[86] Ben Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain: Masculinity, Political Culture and the Struggle for Women's Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 168-74.
[87] Tosh, *A Man's Place*.

the eighteenth century converged with gender panic and a consequent hardening of gender identities.[88] The ideology's chief tool toward marital harmony was the subordination of women to their husbands.[89] The logic of subordination, which turned women into altruist caregivers, underwrote the independence of men.

Independence was the key attribute of manliness, to be acquired through competition with one's peers. Independence suggested autonomy of action and opinion, and implied a host of personal qualities which had to be actively cultivated through self-improvement and self-discipline, among them energetic self-assertion – an aggressive mastery contrasted with female self-denial, will, straightforwardness, and courage – whether of physical or of moral kind was one of many contested points, especially between Evangelical and nonreligiously inflected versions of masculinity.[90]

The conventional view of masculinity contained internal contradictions and was necessarily fluid, but was also just one of a multiplicity of models or styles of masculinity, among them models of deviant desires which Henchard absolutely refuses to entertain whenever he can help it; in his acts of will, primarily in his contracts, he denies deviance. Henchard's contractual style performs conventional expectations to an extreme. He is blunt rather than just straightforward, so willful that others "wince" under him (114), overly energetic, and in utter denial of relational dependencies. These performances invoke the formalist logic of strict rights and obligations of atomism in contracts which proceeded analytically by disregarding dependencies, and its ideological discourse of independence and freedom through willful self-authorship that historians have recounted. Henchard's insecure identity, however, motivates the narration of all of these as superficial rigidities belied by his real motivations. That Henchard does not naturally meet the conventional standard but rather performs it aligns with the theoretical claim in masculinity studies that hegemony, being a historical construct, is established at a collective level; as Connell explains, hegemonic masculinity embodies a "currently accepted" strategy.[91] Demands of masculinity exert power even when the activities they promote are unavailable to the men who consent to them, as Bradley Deane explains.[92] Henchard exemplifies just that.

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[88] On the hardening of identities, whereby cultural demands for unambiguous and consistent displays of feminine and masculine roles escalated, see Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).
[89] Griffin, *The Politics of Gender*, chap. 1.
[90] Tosh, *A Man's Place*, chap. 5.
[91] R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press. 2005), 77.
[92] Bradley Deane, *Masculinity and the New Imperialism: Rewriting Manhood in British Popular Literature, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 7.

The model that Henchard performs fails through a refusal to internalize constraints. Farfrae exhibits a different middleclass model, most closely resonating with the so-called New Man. Before I explain it further I want to examine additional contractual overloads and bring Farfrae into the picture. My claim will be that Farfrae's capitalist success is tied up with a vision of rationality that is in fact not new but old, more apologetic for capitalism than Henchard's, and therefore not espoused by Hardy.

Contracting Like a New Man

Henchard's breaking of the promise to Jopp is the making of a promise to Farfrae. The hiring scene beams with erotic impulse and a reversal of typical power structures. Henchard shows "the inelegance of one whose feelings are nipped and wishes defeated" (64) and admits, "I like thee well! (64). When he hires Farfrae, on terms that he asks Farfrae himself to set, he insists on lodging him in his house.[93] Within this complete reversal of employer/employee disparities, of detached rationality, and of formality, Henchard nonetheless offers a formal contract "so as to be comfortable in our minds… [W]e will… settle terms in black-and-white if you like; though my word's my bond" (65). The gesture exposes a tension, inherent in conventional Victorian masculinity, between adaptations to the commercial age, which Henchard associates with a written contract, and traditional heroic and homosocial concepts of masculinity, which resonate in the proud and informal "my word's my bond".[94] Henchard commits to both, as if to solidify his manliness on all sides, but they are equally empty for Henchard's relation to Farfrae is governed by more passionate impulses; his vulnerability soon pushes him to competitive exhibitions of manliness, and so in disregard of his written and spoken word he dismisses Farfrae.

While competing with Farfrae, Henchard insists repeatedly that he engages in "fair buying and selling" (113). However, his language of contractual rationality is set against a passionate relational enmity, with no longer friendly town councilmen to warn him, each having "individually" (114) suffered under Henchard's hands, and with the angry Jopp as a "commercially [] unsafe" (184) colleague enlisted to do the buying and selling. Against all this relational trouble, Henchard suffers irrecoverable losses. The narrator contradicts Henchard's rationalist language, and describes his commerce as "mortal commercial combat" (116). James Eli Adams offers a historical explanation: he suggests that "the grain market could become an arena of masculine rivalry as fierce and nearly as destructive as a duel by

[93] As Showlater argued, the employment has the overtones of marriage. Showlater, "Unmanning," 106.
[94] On the tension see Tosh, *A Man's Place*, 6-7.

sword" in "the years straddling the abolition of the Corn Laws in 1846, as well as the sometimes ferocious aggression informing the career of the self-made man."[95] However, Hardy's efforts were geared toward the symbolic failure of conventional masculinity in an emergent capitalism no less than toward a referential account.

Passions and interests appear in reverse in Henchard's "combat," as if to confirm his unsuitability to the capitalist world that Albert Hirschman found in early ideological arguments for capitalism.[96] As Hirschman argued, the world of economic self-interest became the basis of the modern social order in the wake of an intellectual fascination of elites with the possibility that the once-suspicious passion for wealth would overcome other passions which blinded men, among them lust for power and sexual lust. Capitalist interest in gain was framed as innocent and undangerous, The anticipated result was a civilizing effect whereby men become predictable, steadfast and methodical, that is, everything that Henchard, blinded by passionate jealousy and a desperate need for respect, is not. His commercial dealings breach the model of tamed passions, and create an unsustainable excess, a combat where commerce was to be associated with peace.[97]

The emerging world of the novel is of tamed passions, as critics often observe. David Musselwhite for instance argued that the novel depicted the over-coding and supplanting of an agrarian, rural, territorial regime represented by Henchard, by an imperial, centralized, impersonal administrative order of which Farfrae is master.[98] Farfrae's commercial success, argues Joanna Devereux, "represents the triumph of the ordinary over the exceptional."[99] Farfrae brings commercial modernity characterized by rational measures: "[Henchard's] accounts were like a bramblewood when Mr. Farfrae came. He used to reckon his sacks by chalk strokes all in a row like garden-palings, measure his ricks by stretching with his arms, weigh his trusses by a lift, judge his hay by a chaw, and settle the price with a curse. But now this accomplished young man does it all by ciphering and mensuration" (107).

And yet, for all these rational measures, Farfrae's suitability for the new world lies in responding to relational concerns in contracts, in a reversal of Henchard's radical atomism and formalism. Farfrae

[95] James Eli Adams, *A History of Victorian Literature* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 358.
[96] Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before Its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).
[97] Ibid., chap. 2.
[98] David Musselwhite, *Social Transformations in Hardy's Tragic Novels: Megamachines and Phantasms* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), chap. 3. See also Neil Powell, "Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*." Powell views Henchard as a figure for the rural world outmoded by the more egalitarian but duller modern world represented by Farfrae; and see the critical review of this line of criticism in Kreisel, *Economic Woman*, chap. 4.
[99] Joanna Devereux, *Patriarchy and Its Discontents: Sexual Politics in Selected Novels and Stories of Thomas Hardy* (London: Routledge, 2003), 52.

refuses his first customer when the competition begins, explaining: “He was once my friend… and it's not for me to take business from him" (115). The same logic applies when the wheel has turned and Henchard is Farfrae’s employee: in an inversion of his own early dismissal, Farfrae sentimentally refuses to discharge Henchard despite his disloyalty (241). Under the same weather conditions which cause losses to Henchard, Farfrae accumulates “a large heap of gold” (191) because he watches not the sky but rather the behavior of local farmers who shift between extremes of buying and selling.

Farfrae’s determining quality is his mastery of the mutually informative relation between rationality and passion: “the curious double strands in Farfrae's thread of life – the commercial and the romantic – were very distinct at times. Like the colours in a variegated cord those contrasts could be seen intertwisted, yet not mingling.” (161) Farfare wins the town’s tradesmen with tearful romantic singing, but when Elizabeth expects romance to inform his life he frankly says, “it’s well you feel a song for a few minutes and your eyes they get quite tearful; but you finish it, and… you don’t’ mind it or think of it again for a long while” (94). "[U]sually sedate” (106) he can nonetheless dance and fling in a costume in town celebrations, and for that very reason, also make a profit on the ball while Henchard’s free alternative remains abandoned. Farfrae is a man whose taming of passions by interests, to return again to Hirschman, is remarkable. He is precisely Hirschman's account of the “‘polished human type – more honest, reliable, orderly, and disciplined, as well as more friendly and helpful, ever ready to find solutions to conflicts….”[100]

This pre-Victorian style of justification for capitalism appears to have found new resonance in the “New Man,” a model of masculinity that was conceptualized as an alternative to the conventional model in the 1890s, but increasingly challenged it already from midcentury. As Tara Macdonald explains, the alternative model was premised on a more egalitarian conception of gender relations in which women were companions rather than subordinates. The New Man’s manliness consisted in sensitivity and gentleness at odds with the ideals of professional competitiveness and aggression.[101] Farfrae, so much closer to this model – rather than compromisingly feminine as is sometimes argued,[102] need not opt for an aggressively demarcated and formally rational economic pursuit. As Hirschamn argued, the kind of

[100] Albert O. Hirschman, “Rival Interpretations of Market Society: Civilizing, Destructive, or Feeble?,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 20, no. 4 (1982): 1465.
[101] Tara MacDonald, *The New Man, Masculinity and Marriage in the Victorian Novel* (New York: Pickering & Chatto, 2015).
[102] E.g., Kreisel, *Economic Woman*.

predictability that a proper relation of passions to interests would foster in the early justification for capitalism would be a "web of interdependent relationships," making communities more cohesive.[103]

The style of modern rationality that Farfae represents consists in a humility of the will, an acknowledgement of its limits. As Mark Granovetter explains in discussing relational embeddedness, "What looks to the analyst like nonrational behavior may be quite sensible when situational constraints… are fully appreciated."[104] Whenever Farfrae acknowledges situational and specifically relational constraints for their delimiting implications, he thereby wins over his fellows and expands his commercial success. The narrator offers his biblical equivalent: "Like Jacob in Padan-Aram, he would no sooner *humbly limit himself* to the ringstraked-and-spotted exceptions of trade than the ringstraked-and-spotted would multiply and prevail" (115). Farfrae's appeal is extremely powerful, a mastery achieved through "genial modesty" (97) that Henchard, compelled to be a man despite himself, fails to grasp. Henchard behaves as if freedom of will and the acknowledgement of constraints are two alternative routes – as if he can gain something from believing in his own free will – but as Weber once argued, in a setting of objective constraints no one can[105]; Farfrae meanwhile is rational in the strict sense of acknowledging constraints, most centrally relational contexts, and aligning means to ends accordingly.

Promises of the Better Man

While Henchard's masculine excesses appear increasingly clumsy, Farfrae's style makes him sexy in a mixture of capitalism and eroticism. The symbolic height is the scene of the modern horsedrill, a machine brought to town at Farfrae's recommendation that it would "revolutionise sowing" (169) – contra Henchard's ridicule. The symbol of industrialization is placed at the center of the Casterbridge market, and becomes the locus of Farfrae's heterosexual erotics. Lucetta's cherry-colored dress "alone rivalled it [the machine] in colour" (168). The machine is literally sexualized as Farfrae gets inside it singing, and the infatuated Lucetta responds with a gesture at reproduction: "The "'Lass of Gowrie' from inside a seed-drill – what a phenomenon!" (169). As Ruth Perry says, industrial technology always

[103] Hischman, *The Passions and the Interests*, 52.
[104] Mark Granovetter, "Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness," *American Journal of Sociology* 91, no.3 (1985): 506.
[105] Max Weber, *Roscher and Knies: The Logical Problems of Historical Economics* trans., Guy Oakes (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 193-94.

provided new metaphors for describing sexual behavior. The discourse of output and production aligned particularly well with heterosexuality.[106]

Lucetta herself lives in a house above the market that had been vacant because the mixture of market and intimacy did not appeal to potential residents. The new sexuality represented in the Lucetta-Farfrae attraction builds precisely on the back-and-forth between romance and exchange that Farfrae masters so well. The constant female gaze at the market functions as forbidden pleasure. Farfrae as New Man is uninhibited in crossing the line to the female side. Hardy shows him watching with Lucetta a market scene of contract negotiation where a laborer is pressured to take a job away from his "sweetheart" (162). Farfrae sheds tears just like Lucetta and then, easily translating the manifest gentleness into business, offers a competing contract to the laborer that would prevent the lovers' breakup. Lucetta is of course falling at his feet. When Farfrae's attention will later return to Elizabeth this will again be represented as a gaze from "the corn-exchange door" (303).

Henchard's loss of Lucetta represents a culmination of contingencies ignited by his performance of masculine control in romantic promises, revealing a parallel to his business catastrophes.

The first promissory overload in romance comes with Sue's arrival. Henchard promises to remarry Sue and so breaks his conflicting promise to marry Lucetta. Performing yet again the outer layers of conventional masculinity, Henchard acknowledges the demand to willingly act on a sense of duty.[107] His declaration that his "first duty is to Susan" (79) frames his action as prioritization through rational assessment: his emphasis is not on the unwieldy constraints which lead him into conflicting promises – as happened with Jopp and Farfrae, but on the mastery involved in correctly prioritizing within them. Henchard's earlier promise to marry Lucetta was likewise a discourse of rational mastery over a conflicted situation; he proposed to her to take the lesser risk between living unmarried with compromised virtue, and getting married with the knowledge that Sue might return, a chance he assessed as "very slight" (79). Claiming mastery over and between two women who need to survive gendered scandals of his making, Henchard is caught up in the difficulties of his own sexual identity which led him first to sell Sue and then to take a lover he never wanted. In both cases Henchard performs not just masculine rational assessment but its other side, of total female subordination, rather than relational companionship. His first communication with Sue in Casterbridge is a letter in which he includes without explanation five guineas, "and it may tacitly have said to her that he bought her back

[106] Ruth Perry, *Novel Relations: The Transformation of Kinship in English Literature and Culture, 1748-1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 243-44.
[107] Griffin, *The Politics of Gender*, chap. 6.

again" (69). He likewise attempts to end his relationship with Lucetta by sending her a check in the mail. Both commodified women return to ignite his fall.

Sue deceives Henchard about Elizabeth, a deceit consequential both before and after he finds out. Before he does, Henchard continues the logic of female subordination and makes Elizabeth promise not to see Farfrae, a promise that only steps up his losses that, the narrator suggests, could have been avoided through relational ties. After Henchard discovers the deceit he drives Elizabeth out (here too giving her money to replace commitment), and re-invites Farfrae's attentions, but at this point Lucetta too has arrived on the scene to take Elizabeth in. The result of all this effort of control is that Farfrae meets Lucetta.

The competition over Lucetta is an erotic triangle with a twist, for only one side appreciates that he is in competition with the other. Eve Sedgwick's analysis of erotic triangles suggested that the bonds between the two men rivals in these cases are no less potent than the man-woman ones; contra gender-neutral readings of triangles, Sedgwick claimed that they rely on the traffic in women to cement male-to-male homosocial bonds.[108] Her analysis holds true here, except that Henchard alone is at work on the bond. Henchard's repeat traffic in women is more about his obsession with Farfrae. His desperation drives him again to use contract as an isolated realm of formal security. He threatens to expose Lucetta's past if she does not promise to marry him. She promises, but uses the period of his secured silence to marry Farfrae. His reliance on contract as a mode of control turns on him again.

Observe that the problem that Hardy explored was not the unenforceability of the promises that Henchard uses. All of his trafficked women cooperate: Sue lived with her buyer, Elizabeth stops seeing Farfrae, and Lucetta considers her coerced promise binding and is driven to break it when she learns about Sue's sale. Legal force is not the problem, but a compulsory masculinity in contracts, misaligned with its surroundings.

Henchard's loss of Lucetta is tied up with the final collapse of his business in bankruptcy. Henchard could have avoided the bankruptcy at the last moment by borrowing money from Lucetta. Compelled by conventional masculinity to refuse, Henchard says, "I'm not the man to sponge on a woman…" (209). As an alternative which sits with hegemonic gender roles he asks Lucetta to give his largest creditor the impression that they will soon be married. That route is blocked, formally because she is already married to Farfrae, and symbolically because the scene is geared toward an explicit invocation of Henchard's

[108] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

masculine performance in contract, and he must go wrong with every stringent reliance on its assumptions.

Showlater describes Henchard's fall as an unmanning in which he connects with his feminine side.[109] And yet, unlike the combination that Farfrae achieves, this is simply the other side of the same coin, and so not a real change: a radical conventional masculinity replaced by femininity as subordination: "He schooled himself to accept [Elizabeth's] will… as absolute and unquestionable" (304). When Hardy combined romantic and business promises in the downfall plot, he used narrative form to reinforce not the turn from masculine to feminine but rather Farfrae's strategy of "intertwisting" realms to successful effect.[110]

A few years after the publication of *The Passions and the Interest*s Hirschman responded to readers who wanted to know what happened next in his narrative, when the nineteenth century wore on. He observed that the optimistic vision embedded in the view of capitalism as a driver of social peace through the rule of interests over passions was not shared by the Victorians, who experienced the violence of industrialism at home. Optimism had to take more complex forms, and benevolent views of capitalism were recast in critical garb.[111] *The Mayor of Casterbridge* confirms the pessimistic mood. Fafrae is a suspicious character; his globalist capitalist consciousness represents a coldness increasingly revealed in his insensibility to the violence with which he does not simply defeat Henchard but takes his life to himself – and Hardy did not flinch in exceeding realist narration to show it. The victory of Farfrae was uncontested and yet was set in a literary form of tragedy whereby a "man of character" becomes a sinking hero, a victim of imperatives he does not fully appreciate.

Levine argues that Henchard's tragic departure at the close of the novel finally asserts the power of his will: he chooses his own disaster. Henchard uses a legal will as instrument of unilateral imposition on those left behind, but his willful assertion is total self-annihilation: "that no man remember me" (333), anticipating, as Levine says, "the worst they [society and nature] can do."[112] In the last moment Henchard achieves a reconciliation between acknowledging constraints and acting willfully, by operationalizing tragedy as the artistic form appropriate for an emergent capitalism.

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[109] Showlater "Unmanning," 71, 114.
[110] To an extent, this point falls in line with efforts like Kreisel's to read a dialectic; read this way, the figure of Farfrae is not simply Henchard's opposite but a figurative parallel to the synthesis achieved between Henchard and Elizabeth together, as masculine and feminine strategies. Kreisel, *Economic Woman*.
[111] Hirschman, "Rival Interpretations."
[112] Levine, *The Realistic Imagination*, 241.

At the closing of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, when Hardy gave the upwardly-mobile Elizabeth a retrospective moment of control, often evaluated as a sign of liberal optimism,[113] the paragraph read more like a mocking echo of *Middlemarch* (my interventions in square brackets):

> [T]he finer movements *[like Eliot's "subtle movements,"]* of her nature found scope in discovering to the narrow-lived ones around her the secret… of making limited opportunities *[just like the limited opportunities of Eliot's modern Theresa]* endurable; which she deemed to consist in the cunning enlargement *[like incalculable diffusiveness, but with a wink]*, by a species of microscopic treatment *[Eliot's microscopic lens]*, of those minute forms of satisfaction *[just Eliot's invisible minute processes, but "satisfaction" sounding irony rather than sympathy – a consequence of the "cunning" and the overall context of "endurance" rather than achievement]* that offer themselves to everybody not in positive pain; which, thus handled, have much of the same inspiring effect upon life as wider interests cursorily embraced *[Eliot's theme of "unhistoric acts" which nonetheless achieve a greater good, ironized here by the equation which suggests that what makes small things, which are merely absences of positive pain, as inspiring as "wider interests" is not a real worthiness but a particular – and cunning - way of looking at them and abandoning greater goals]* (334).

Already sharing the *fin de siècle* mood, Hardy was unable to reconcile his readers to what Armstrong describes as Victorian fiction's preference for partial gratification over threats to the social order.[114] He ended with Elizabeth's middleclass privileges, his last sentence a reminder that "happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain" (335).

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This and the previous two chapters examined persistent tropes appearing in contracts histories – abstraction and freedom, to show how deep-reaching departures from them spoke to a relational sociality which required intensive effort, leaving older forms behind. Strikingly, the relational liberalism that these novels delineated, whether from an internal or external (Hardy) perspective, could consecrate the market precisely because of the persistent sociality typifying modern capitalism. The role of

[113] Reed, *Victorian Will*, 352-53. Reed also quotes Hardy's own protests against being labeled a pessimist.
[114] Armstrong, *How Novels Think*, 137.

promises at the heart of this vision challenges contracts historians to extend and complicate their accounts of Victorian liberalism in contract.

What remains to be accounted for, however, is the persistence of statuses long after liberalism, relational and atomistic, had captured the Victorian social imagination. The next Part develops a new assessment.