Then drink, boys, drink!
And see ye do not spill,
For if ye do, ye shall drink two,
For ‘tis our master’s will.

‘The Harvest Supper,’ *Adam Bede*

When George Eliot chose the motto for Chapter 2 of *Middlemarch*, she eased the task of mid-twentieth-century genre critics who defined the novel as anti-romance. The motto casts Dorothea as a fuzzy-eyed Don Quixote and Celia as a humbly clear-sighted Sancho Panza able to distinguish a barber’s shaving dish from the helmet of Mambrino. The anti-romance definition also fits other characters, such as Maggie, Rosamond, and Gwendolen, who, like the Don, suffer from reading romance and either do or do not progress from harboring romantic notions to achieving a valid perception of something such interpretations called ‘reality.’ It also applies particularly well to the often-noticed Quixotic allusions in *Middlemarch*. George Eliot’s early works support the application of this opposition by presenting a pattern which associates opium with romanticism, especially the romanticism of intense love, and alcohol with realism, especially her detailed and clear-eyed representations of provincial culture. During her early period, she also represents many of her Midlands settings as metaphorically sick societies and alcohol as the remedy to which their members erroneously turn.

*Alcohol and Realist Manifestoes*

Many of the drinking scenes in George Eliot’s early fiction have to do with her realist theory of fiction, the theory which moves...
Raymond Williams and Patrick Brantlinger to group her among the novelists who aimed to acquaint the respectable middle classes with the true behavior of their social inferiors. References to alcohol occur in all the manifestoes of realism in the early fiction, most notably in the Dutch paintings passage in Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*. Of all possible kinds of sordidness that might fulfill the obligation of the mimetic artist, George Eliot chooses tipsiness.

Opium intoxication, on the other hand, has traditionally been associated with George Eliot’s realist aesthetic not because of her honest representations of tipsy characters, but because of her representation of romanticism as opium. In keeping with the shorthand formalist definition of the novel as anti-romance, Barbara Hardy (1970) describes *The Mill on the Floss* as Bildungsroman narration of Maggie’s erratic and incomplete progress away from romantic self-delusion sometimes figured as opium and toward mature understanding of reality. Quoting a sentence from the 1860 letter which states that ‘the Highest election and calling is to do without opium’ (*GEL* 3:336), Hardy concludes that *The Mill* is ‘about living without fantasy and opiate’ (*Critical Essays* 50).

This association between dreamy romance and intoxication occurs in all George Eliot’s early fiction. In ‘Mr Gilfil,’ poisonous drugs (and the sickness they cause) stand for both romanticism in the sense of art located in the long ago or far away, and romanticism in the sense of a passionate, dangerous, illicit love affair. In *Adam Bede*, poisons and intoxication represent the affair between Hetty and Arthur, which again is romantic in both senses. The metaphor recurs in *The Mill* in descriptions of Maggie’s passion for Stephen. Associations between intoxication and romance are thoroughly usual in mid-nineteenth-century British literature. The hero of Lewes’s 1847 novel *Ranthetape*, for example, like many of his youthful and romantic contemporaries, is often ‘intoxicated’ with love, ambition, or the wine of joy.

In such examples, the intoxication representing romantic illusions sometimes results from metaphorical consumption of love represented as opium or poison. Meanwhile alcohol takes its related