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Review of Dead From the Waist Down. Scholars and Scholarship in Literature and the Popular Imagination

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A. D. Nuttall, *Dead From the Waist Down. Scholars and Scholarship in Literature and the Popular Imagination* (Yale University Press, 2003).

pp. xii + 228. ISBN 0 300 09840 5

In this book, which derives its title from Browning's poem 'A Grammarian's Funeral', Professor Nuttall seeks to explore the profound change that he believes took place in the popular conception of scholars ('Knowers') and scholarship between the Renaissance when Faustus was seen as an excitingly powerful figure, definitely 'sexy' as the current phrase goes, and the Nineteenth Century when the scholar became a representative of 'sexless deathliness'. Nuttall believes that a qualification needs to be made, however, in that from Francis Bacon onwards the Knower figure was split into two, the scientist and the scholar, with the former retaining elements of Faustian glamour and still being 'sexually charged'. Thus in *Middlemarch* Lydgate is 'sexy' whereas Mr Casaubon emphatically is not; as Faust damns himself for Helen of Troy so Lydgate blights his life for Rosamond. Nuttall explores his theme through a series of linked essays. The first, labelled 'Introduction', is on Browning's poem connecting it with Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* (as did the great American literary scholar R. D. Altick in an important essay on the poem published in 1965 to which Nuttall makes no reference). The second discusses Eliot's characterization of Mr Casaubon. The third deals with the Victorian scholar and Rector of Lincoln College, Oxford, Mark Pattison, who has often been taken (though emphatically not by Gordon Haight) as Eliot's model for her Casaubon. The fourth is on the celebrated Renaissance humanist Isaac Casaubon, of whom Pattison wrote a life. Finally, the 'Conclusion' considers A. E. Housman, approached through Tom Stoppard's 1997 play ('a work of breathtaking brilliance') *The Invention of Love* in which in his presentation of Housman Stoppard re-integrates sexual passion, albeit unfulfilled, and high scholarship.

In the course of this densely-written book we find a number of *aperçus* and suggestive critical comments on points of details, e.g., the improbability that such a narrow pedant as Mr Casaubon should conceive of so vast an enterprise as 'The Key to All Mythologies': instead of 'editing a text by another, more creative, hand' or 'producing a series of small-scale nitpicking articles on points of fact ... he is writing *The Golden Bough!*' Nuttall goes on, however, to make the fascinating point that Eliot makes Mr Casaubon's project a reversal of the historical Casaubon's greatest achievement, namely his triumphant scholarly refutation of mystical Hermetic theories about an 'original untainted philosophical and theological truth': Mr Casaubon 'espouses an essentially irrational doctrine of gradually adulterated purity that his namesake had destroyed, seemingly for all time'. All extremely interesting ('a dreadful word, that "interesting"', comments Nuttall when castigating the 'matey neutrality' now so often shown by university teachers towards their students' work) but we tend to lose sight of his main argument as he thus develops some notable subsidiary issue, or, less profitably, indulges in the kind of literary free-association game to which he seems prone – entirely understandably, one has to say, given the evident width and depth of his literary knowledge. The comparison of Mr Brooke's dinner party at the beginning of *Middlemarch* to the Gloucestershire scene in *I Henry IV*, for example, that Brooke's mention of Sir Humphrey Davy might be echoing the name of Justice Shallow's servant, etc., strikes me as more than a little strained, and one's head does begin to spin rather at another point as Nuttall's critical

analysis segues from Dorothea in Rome to Chaucer's Criseyde, Tess of the D'Urbervilles and Sue Bridehead, or at yet another when his discussion of Mr Casaubon's proposal letter to Dorothea leads him on to the invocation of Shakespeare's Angelo ('one catches an altered echo'), Dorothy L. Sayers, *Jane Eyre* and Daphne Du Maurier. A propos of Dorothea in Rome, and her marriage with Casaubon generally, Nuttall finds himself wanting 'to know more than George Eliot is prepared to tell us about what happened in bed between these unhappy persons, in Rome and at Lowick Manor'. He seems surprisingly unaware of Barbara Hardy's groundbreaking discussion of this very topic in her book *The Appropriate Form* (1964), in one chapter of which she illuminates the various subtle ways in which Eliot suggests to the reader that poor Mr Casaubon is, in fact, impotent.

Nuttall canvasses again the much-discussed question of whether or not Mark Pattison and his young wife served George Eliot as models for Casaubon and Dorothea and one thinks how grandly irritated Gordon Haight would be if he could know that this 'canard', as he called it, was still flapping its wings. Nuttall inclines towards the late Warden Sparrow's view that George Eliot's and G. H. Lewes's 1870 visit to the Pattisons in Oxford did help to inspire the creation of Casaubon and Dorothea but misses a trick when he says 'the dates are slightly wrong' because Eliot had already begun writing *Middlemarch* before the Oxford visit and *Middlemarch* 'begins with Dorothea Brooke and Mr Casaubon'. It does indeed so begin in the novel as published but, as Jerome Beaty long ago showed in his '*Middlemarch*' from *Notebook to Novel*, George Eliot first began writing her novel of provincial life in July 1869 with Lydgate, the Vincys, Bulstrodes and others, and it was not until December 1870, after the Oxford visit, that she embarked on what was first envisaged as another story altogether entitled 'Miss Brooke', introducing the characters of Dorothea and Mr Casaubon, but which she shortly afterwards spliced together with the original 'Middlemarch'. Nuttall has no difficulty in finding passages in Pattison's *Memoirs* (written after *Middlemarch* had been published) that make him sound like Eliot's Casaubon but admits that there is never the slightest hint that Pattison may have once thought that his honoured friend had him in mind when she portrayed her agonizingly self-conscious failed scholar. In fact, he ends up by arguing, sensibly enough, that 'thousands of percepts and memories' must have gone into Eliot's creation of Casaubon and it is far too reductive to see him simply as a portrait of Pattison (one might say the same of Haight's tetchy insistence that it was unforgiven Dr Brabant she was depicting).

Here again, as in the long stretches of discussion of academic life in Pattison's Oxford (modern dons have to work much harder, we gather – 'quite recently', writes Professor Nuttall, 'I remember reflecting with relief that I could *just* keep Christmas Day completely clear'), we tend to lose sight of the central argument of the book, any satisfactory development of which would surely require a wider scope of reference than we find here. Some account would need to be taken, for example, of such things as Scott's creation of the super-pedant Dr Jonas Dryasdust and Carlyle's use of this figure in Sartor Resartus, of *Frankenstein*, of the mockery by Dickens and others in the 1830s of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, of Dickens's presentation of Dr Strong in *David Copperfield* and Peacock's of Dr Opimian in *Gryll Grange*, of how and why Macaulay's highly research-based *History of England* achieved best-seller status, and so on.

In style this is, as befits its subject, a very donnish book. Dedicated to Oxford with an epigraph drawn from Hopkins's poem about the great Oxford scholar Duns Scotus, it contains a number of passing observations such as this: 'All those with experience of research and academic affairs will know exactly how dogged Dr X can toil for years and be suddenly refuted by Mr Y, who has never toiled at all but has kept his eye on current periodicals and has an eye for spotting the critical argument when it comes along' (p. 52). It assumes a readership that does not need to be told what terms like 'hypallage', *aporia* and 'agalmatophilia' mean (oddly, 'ecphrasis' and 'euhemerism' are explained, however), a readership familiar also with that "fishes-in-the-trees" topos which proved so fertile for twentieth century literary criticism' (p. 97). The general tone is urbane and witty (with occasional lapses such as the jokey phrase about Dorothea's 'honeymoon with Dr Death'), and there is an eloquent and impressive defence of the value of, and need for, true scholarship in Nuttall's 'Conclusion'. One ends the book unpersuaded by his overall thesis but better informed about a whole range of things and grateful for new insights and some challenging new views – especially, perhaps, the penetrating discussion found on pp. 68-71 of the fate of Dorothea and of the disappointment that so many readers have felt about the way in which she dwindles into Mrs Ladislaw, and the way in which *Middlemarch* is, in fact, a sadder book than he believes most readers take it to be.

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