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BASIL AND VAMPIRE: FEARS OF DISSECTION IN *MIDDLEMARCH*

By Keiji Yata

I

In the final chapter of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, after describing the death of Lydgate and Rosamond's subsequent second marriage to 'an elderly and wealthy physician',¹ the narrator tells us that Lydgate

once called her his basil plant; and when she asked for an explanation, said that basil was a plant which had flourished wonderfully on a murdered man's brains. (Finale; 513)²

Rosamond is, before marrying Lydgate, 'admitted to be the flower of Mrs Lemon's school, the chief school in the county' (11; 62). Now her husband uses a different metaphor. In what sense can Lydgate consider himself 'murdered'?

Tertius Lydgate comes to Middlemarch as an ambitious young surgeon, intending to 'do good small work for Middlemarch, and great work for the world' (15; 96). Some time after getting married to Rosamond, however, he finds himself in a situation that finally forces him to leave the town in disgrace. His downfall is caused by factors in both his personal and in his professional life: not only is he the husband of a proud, vain woman but also, as a doctor of a new hospital, he has administrative and clerical duties, which include voting to decide the chaplain of the hospital. Because Lydgate's attitudes and perceptions of women are framed and determined by an earlier encounter, it is important to examine this previous relationship before discussing the domestic life of this scientist. While studying in Paris, Lydgate falls in love with a French actress. After a strange accident on stage and later revelation of the true meaning of the accident, Lydgate's conception of woman as an ideal vanishes instantly. He resolves to 'take a strictly scientific view of woman' (15; 99). This resolution seems to initiate his new perspective of the female species, but his rational pragmatism is undermined by his emotions and, beguiled by Rosamond's beauty, his scientific resolution collapses as he repeats his earlier mistake.

Once in Middlemarch, he begins to be drawn to the beautiful daughter of the mayor, believing that 'this play at being a little in love was agreeable, and did not interfere with grave pursuits' (27; 168). As Mason contends,

it is the lack of an empirical check on pre-conceptions that makes the personal side of Lydgate's life vulgarly unscientific.... The facts of the body are not adequate evidence for theories of the soul.³

Lydgate fails to apply his 'strictly scientific view' to Rosamond, only to find himself yoked to the woman whom he later calls 'his basil plant', and through her, also to 'the intolerable narrowness and purblind conscience of the society' (4; 24). Lydgate's 'spots of commonness' (15; 96) originate mainly from this failure to apply his science to the wider context of society. After experiencing his wife's extravagant tastes and their inevitable financial consequences,

Lydgate eventually tells her to economize, only to anger her and find himself deeper in debt. Rosamond will not listen to him and the differences deepen into a serious rift in the marital relationship. Asa Briggs, in his essay on this novel, asserts: 'It is marriage, and not any professional deficiencies, that provides the key to his failure.'⁴ Can we really be certain that his professional sphere of life has nothing to do with his failure?

To turn to Lydgate's professional life, as Deresiewicz points out, 'Lydgate's work both requires him to engage social reality at its most mundane level and preserves for him a Carlylean realm of pure thought.'⁵ Lydgate tries in vain to distance himself from such worldly troubles as political issues at hospital management. Yet after all, he is compelled, in one of the most critical moments of the novel, to yield: he has to vote along with Bulstrode, the hypocritical banker, against his own preference. This vote associates him deeper with the banker, and later involves him in another crucial episode, Raffles's death. This casts a dark cloud over the young doctor. Rumour spreads, making people lose confidence in Lydgate and he eventually chooses to move out of the town in disgrace. At the end of the novel, however, he is reported to be 'what is called a successful man' (Finale; 512). We are told that Lydgate

had gained an excellent practice, alternating, according to the season, between London and a Continental bathing-place; having written a treatise on Gout, a disease which has a good deal of wealth on its side. His skill was relied on by many paying patients. (Finale; 512)

After telling the reader of Lydgate's worldly success as a doctor, the narrator immediately adds: 'he always regarded himself as a failure: he had not done what he once meant to do' (Finale; 512). His bitter recognition of himself as a failure is what makes him call his own wife a plant that flourishes 'wonderfully on a murdered man's brains.'

II

Lydgate attributes at least some part of his failure to his wife when he calls her 'his basil plant'. As noted above, this allusion is to one of the stories in *Decameron*. If we examine both the original story and Lydgate's reference, the difference will show us the young doctor's attitude. It will show how Lydgate uses the original story ironically to describe his marital relationship. The fifth story on the fourth day of *Decameron* is presented in a summarised version at the beginning of the story:

Lisabetta's brothers slay her lover,
who appears to her in a dream and shows her
where he is buried, whereupon she privily
disinters his head and sets it in a pot of basil.
Thereover making moan a great while every day,
her brothers take it from her and she
for grief dies a little while thereafterward.⁶

In a stark contrast with what Lydgate implies in his allusion, the plant in the Decameron story embodies, though in a strange way, not a wife who drags her husband into bankruptcy, but the eternal love between the hapless lovers. The girl tenderly adores the plant, and it grows well accordingly:

after she had a great while looked thereon, she would bend over and fall to weeping, so long that her tears bathed all the basil, which, by dint of long and assiduous tending, as well as by reason of the fatness of the earth, proceeding from the rotting head that was therein, waxed passing fair and very sweet of savor.⁷

This is essentially a sad love story. Even with some morbid elements, however, there definitely is a triumph of love, in the growth of the fragrant basil. A comparison of Boccaccio's tale, in which Lisbetta (Isabella) is murdered by her brothers, with Lydgate's narrative to his wife causes a completely different picture to emerge. Lydgate's retelling erases and rephrases vital components to allow an ironic criticism of his wife whilst opening the way for him to accept the painful situation as a victim, not as an accomplice. Lydgate, for example, doesn't tell his wife who kills the 'murdered man' in the first place, allowing Rosamond, who is ignorant of the story, to assume that the murderer is supposed to be herself, whilst the reader, unfamiliar with Boccaccio, would also assume that the murderer is the wife and the victim the husband. Thus, Lydgate's cunning (if unintentional) revisionist account transforms a tragic romance of a couple torn apart by family into one of vampirism, into a mechanism of oppression and exploitation.

Once the role of victim has been accepted and internalized into a passive stoicism, the regret and remorse implicit in the realm of personal responsibility are nullified. Thus Lydgate's unconscious defence mechanism is to accept his position as victim, masking his own responsibility and contribution whilst transferring the blame and culpability for their bleak situation onto Rosamond. When confronted with her husband's accusation that she is 'his basil plant', Rosamond has 'a placid but strong answer to such speeches. Why then had he chosen her?' (Finale; 512). In her rejoinder, Rosamond forcefully drags Lydgate's botanical tale down to earth displacing the metaphorical relationship he has constructed with the real one. Although the narrator does not tell us of Lydgate's reaction to his wife's words, we can assume that he would have retreated to his usual silence or to his quiet study.

The following two episodes show how Lydgate copes with similar confrontations. First let us consider his love affair with the Paris woman, Madame Laure, which is briefly mentioned above. Lydgate sees her accidentally stab her husband on stage, killing him as a result. She is released by the police, as it is regarded as a pure accident, and disappears. He tries to see her again, only to find her acting in Avignon. When he asks her to marry him, she tells him that she '*meant to do it*' (italics original, 15; 98), though she did not plan it. When Lydgate asks her if her husband was brutal to her, in an effort to understand her, she says, 'No! he wearied me; he was too fond: he would live in Paris, and not in my country; that was not agreeable to me' (15; 98). Lydgate cannot accept the idea of the woman killing her husband only because he was too fond of her. Now he sees 'this woman – the first to whom he had given his young adoration – amid the throng of stupid criminals' (15; 98). The object of adoration suddenly

becomes a criminal. He would not and could not accept such transformation in a woman. As a scientist, he would have rejoiced in the metamorphosis of a worm into a butterfly. In the real world of his private life, however, he cannot accept the change.

Another scene which testifies to his inability to accept raw reality is the one where Lydgate, as a husband, realizes that there is no way out of debt, and out of the hell of married life, if Rosamond obstinately goes on in the same way:

Lydgate sat paralysed by opposing impulses: since no reasoning he could apply to Rosamond seemed likely to conquer her assent, he wanted to smash and grind some object on which he could at least produce an impression, or else to tell her brutally that he was master, and she must obey. But he not only dreaded the effect of such extremities on their mutual life – he had a growing dread of Rosamond’s quiet elusive obstinacy, which would not allow any assertion of power to be final; and again, she had touched him in a spot of keenest feeling by implying that she had been deluded with a false vision of happiness in marrying him. As to saying that he was master, it was not the fact. The very resolution to which he had wrought himself by dint of logic and honourable pride was beginning to relax under her torpedo⁸ contact. He swallowed half his cup of coffee, and then rose to go. (64; 408)

Here is another biological metaphor that now compares Rosamond to a marine creature with a strong paralysing weapon to protect itself and to hunt its prey. The paralysing shock forces Lydgate to face up to the reality where there seems no easy way out. He ‘dreaded the effect’, and ‘he had a growing dread of Rosamond’s quiet elusive obstinacy’ – these dreads are the fear of reality: the fear of the need to acknowledge one’s own failure. As Furst notes, ‘The tenacious advocate of medical reform in the public forum becomes in his private life a yielding prey to his wife’s petulant obstinacy.’⁹ Lydgate can dissect corpses on his table at the hospital, but he is not even able to touch this deadly creature, his wife. And yet Rosamond, in her own way, is afraid of her husband’s surgical touch. This fear will be discussed later.

We witness a similar pattern of exposure of realities by a woman, followed by the male’s powerlessness and refusal to accept them, in the relationship of Dorothea and Casaubon. Casaubon marries Dorothea to get a wife who would assist him in his study with ‘an ardent self-sacrificing affection’ (5; 32), but he finds, instead of what he has expected, a woman who can think and judge by herself. On their honeymoon in Rome the bride asks her husband:

‘And all your notes,’ said Dorothea, whose heart had already burned within her on this subject, so that now she could not help speaking with her tongue. ‘All those rows of volumes – will you not now do what you used to speak of? – will you not make up your mind what part of them you will use, and begin to write the book which will make your vast knowledge useful to the world? I will write to your dictation, or I will copy and extract what you tell me: I can be of no other use.’ (20; 128)

This reaction, to Casaubon, feels like a complete betrayal:

She was as blind to his inward troubles as he to hers: she had not yet learned those hidden conflicts in her husband which claim our pity. She had not yet listened patiently to his heartbeats, but only felt that her own was beating violently. (20; 128)

Even without his young wife's intervention, Casaubon is aware that his work is proving fruitless but her vocalization of his fears and insecurities not only confirms them, radically transforming the feeble minded scholar's perception of Dorothea from a strong potential ally into one more enemy intent on sabotaging his life's work: 'And this cruel outward accuser was there in the shape of a wife – nay, of a young bride who ... seemed to present herself as a spy watching everything with a malign power of inference' (20; 128). Here, we see the moment when one person's perspective of another person changes; from a view involving wishful misunderstanding to the bleaker one of misunderstanding based on fear. Fear of the discovery of truth, and of the confrontation with the true self, can be a strong factor when a person is in a difficult situation. It also applies to the case of Rosamond in her alienation from her husband.

III

By transforming the tragic love story into a mechanism of exploitation, Lydgate puts his wife in the same category as a vampire. The wife, however, has explicitly used the fiendish term long before her husband does:

The Lydgate with whom she had been in love had been a group of airy conditions for her, most of which had disappeared, while their place had been taken by every-day details which must be lived through slowly from hour to hour, not floated through with a rapid selection of favourable aspects. The habits of Lydgate's profession, his home preoccupation with scientific subjects, which seemed to her almost like a morbid vampire's taste, his peculiar views of things which had never entered into the dialogue of courtship – all these continually alienating influences, even without the fact of his having placed himself at a disadvantage in the town. (64; 409)

As Lydgate immerses himself in his work, and the couple flounder amid debts and repayments, his profession seems to Rosamond to take him away from her, without offering sufficient compensation. This hostility is compounded by his study of the human body, which, even though its need is largely acknowledged, is still a taboo; it is a mysterious, dark and forbidden territory, occupied by resurrectionists like Burke and Hare.¹⁰ Thus, with science of the body viewed as an alien and heretical discipline, it is almost as unacceptable for Rosamond to have a professional anatomist as a husband, as it is for the provincial town to have one as a trustworthy doctor. Before their marriage, Lydgate tells Rosamond of his passion as a scientist, and in a way, she has been warned of what to expect when she becomes a wife of a surgeon whose ambition is in anatomy.

'I am thinking of a great fellow, who was about as old as I am three hundred years ago, and had already begun a new era in anatomy.... His name was

Vesalius. And the only way he could get to know anatomy as he did, was by going to snatch bodies at night, from graveyards and places of execution.'

'Oh!' said Rosamond, with a look of disgust on her pretty face, 'I am very glad you are not Vesalius. I should have thought he might find some less horrible way than that.'

'No, he couldn't,' said Lydgate, going on too earnestly to take much notice of her answer. 'He could only get a complete skeleton by snatching the whitened bones of a criminal from the gallows, and burying them, and fetching them away by bits secretly, in the dead of night.'

.....

'And what happened to him afterwards?' said Rosamond, with some interest.

'Oh, he had a good deal of fighting to the last. And they did exasperate him enough at one time to make him burn a good deal of his work. Then he got shipwrecked just as he was coming from Jerusalem to take a great chair at Padua. He died rather miserably.' (45; 283-284)

George Eliot had a first-rate knowledge and understanding of the science of the age, because science and literature were not as remote from each other as they are now. Borrowing the words applied to George Henry Lewes and his interests in both literature and science, Eliot 'had not allowed "culture" to split' either.¹¹ She was quite familiar with the most advanced ideas concerning the theory of evolution and biological organisms. On the other hand, she knows and understands ordinary people's fear of and prejudice against modern science. For example, when the people of Middlemarch talk of the new doctor's interests in dead bodies, they are genuinely afraid that the cutting knife of so-called science might disturb peace after death, rather than rejoicing in the doctor's scientific eagerness to learn the mysteries of the body: 'This Dr Lydgate that's been for cutting up everybody before the breath was well out o' the body,' one of them says, 'it's plain enough what use he wanted to make o' looking into respectable people's insides' (71; 447). As Ruth Richardson asserts, 'before the Anatomy Act was passed in 1832 dissection was a much hated and feared aggravation of the death sentence only in certain cases of murder.'¹² As the setting for the novel is 1829-32, it is precisely at this period of medical history that the young surgeon tried to find the hidden truth of 'primitive tissue' (15; 95).

Let us now return to the earlier discussion about the basil plant. In John Keats's 'Isabella; or The Pot of Basil', published in 1820, the poet composes a narrative based upon the Decameron story. He describes the basil plant in a pot as follows:

And so she ever fed it with thin tears,
Whence thick, and green, and beautiful it grew,
So that it smelt more balmy than its peers
Of basil-tufts in Florence; for it drew
Nurture besides, and life, from human fears,
From the fast mouldering head there shut from view:
So that the jewel, safely casketed,
Came forth, and in perfumed leafits spread.¹³

Keats basically follows Boccaccio closely throughout, but he adds a modern twist to the original story. The poet attributes basil's fast growth to the fact that the plant takes its nurture from 'human fears'.¹⁴ Fear is one of the most prominent of the human emotions. Thus when he narrates that the plant grows on fears, Keats has predicted Lydgate's version where the plant grows taking nutrition from ambition, another of man's strong emotions. When she regards her husband's scientific research as a 'vampire's taste' (64; 409), Rosamond expresses a fear of anatomy, and consequently, of its effect on their marriage. Vampires break into the victim's skin, suck blood and make the victims turn into vampires themselves, contaminating the victim's blood with their cursed fluid. She does not want him to break into her obstinacy, and to contaminate her with his taste; rather, she wants to assimilate him to her, just as the town tries to absorb and tame the young innovative newcomer. Her fears arise primarily from the basic fact that he is an outsider who is studying the human body, which is the most familiar object for us and, at the same time, the most unknown territory. Although the vampire she sees in her husband does not drain blood from his 'victims', his act of surgical penetration still challenges the natural boundaries between life and death and, with no boundary sacred, she fears he may transgress further, into the hidden territory of her obstinate vanity. As Keats's basil grows on the dead man's fears, Rosamond's basil grows on her fears, as well as on her (virtually) dead husband's lost ambition.

In the case of Dorothea and Casaubon, she becomes, to her ageing husband's eye, a spy who knows and opens up more of his inner conflicts than he himself would acknowledge the truth of. The fear feeds the disorder in his ailing heart, which finally takes his life. Similarly, Lydgate dreads his wife's obstinacy that paralyses him like the touch of a torpedo. He uses the basil story to express his ironical understanding of the bitter marital relationship. On the other hand, Rosamond's obstinacy is a guise to keep her realm of vanity intact from the surgical knife in her husband's hand, 'The boundary of the skin,' as Logan contends, 'cannot be physically crossed without transforming the object of study, the sentient body, into an insentient corpse.'¹⁵ Even if Rosamond is an ultimate egoist who 'reads the world through the filter of her desires',¹⁶ she has to keep her obstinacy well protected under the threat of the torpedo's touch, in order to escape the fear of being dissected alive.

When Lydgate tells his wife that his hero, Vesalius the anatomist, had 'died rather miserably,'

There was a moment's pause before Rosamond said, 'Do you know, Tertius, I often wish you had not been a medical man.'

'Nay, Rosy, don't say that,' said Lydgate, drawing her closer to him. 'That is like saying you wish you had married another man.' (45; 284)

Just as the town of Middlemarch tries to assimilate and swallow the new doctor, and after its failure, stigmatizes and exiles him, so Rosamond has to kill her 'medical man', in order to overcome her fears, and ultimately, to survive.

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- 1 George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Bert G. Hornback (New York: Norton, 2nd ed. 2000), Finale, p. 512. Henceforth, references to the novel, citing chapter and page, are in the text where appropriate.
- 2 The allusion here is to the tale of Lisabetta (Isabella in English), which appears as one of the stories in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. This story and a poem by Keats on the same subject will be discussed later.
- 3 Michael York Mason, 'Middlemarch and Science: Problems of Life and Mind', *Review of English Studies*, 22 (1971), p. 163.
- 4 Asa Briggs, 'Middlemarch and the Doctors' in *The Collected Essays of Asa Briggs*, vol. 2: *Images, Problems, Standpoints, Forecasts* (London: The Harvester Press, 1985), p. 53.
- 5 William Deresiewicz, 'Heroism and organicism in the case of Lydgate', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 38:4 (Autumn, 1998), p. 725.
- 6 Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, The John Payne Translation Revised and Annotated by Charles S. Singleton, vol. I, Days I-V (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), p. 327.
- 7 *Decameron*, p. 330.
- 8 "“Torpedo” in this context refers to the fish, sometimes also known as cramp fish or electric ray, which emits electric discharges.' Catherine Neale, *George Eliot: Middlemarch* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), p. 98.
- 9 Lilian R. Furst, 'Struggling for Medical Reform in Middlemarch', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 48-3 (Dec. 1993), p. 359.
- 10 Burke and Hare committed a series of murders in Edinburgh in 1828 to get corpses for dissection. See Ruth Richardson, "“Trading assassins” and the licensing of anatomy', in Roger French and Andrew Wear, eds., *British Medicine in an Age of Reform* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 74-91.
- 11 Geoffrey Tillotson, 'Introduction', in George Henry Lewes, *The Principles of Success in Literature* (Westmead, Farnborough, Hants.: Gregg International Publishers, 1969), no pagination.
- 12 Richardson, p. 76.
- 13 Jack Stillinger, ed. *John Keats: Complete Poems* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard U.P., 1982), p. 196, ll. 425-432.
- 14 'Isabella; or The Pot of Basil', line 429.

- 15 Peter M. Logan, 'Conceiving the body: realism and medicine in *Middlemarch*', *History of the Human Sciences*, 4:2 (June, 1991), p. 204.
- 16 Pauline Nestor, *George Eliot: Critical Issues* (Houndmills, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002), p. 135.