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## CHAUCER AND GEORGE ELIOT

*George Schlesinger*

I was interested to read David Ball's article on "Triangular Patterns in Middlemarch" (Review No. 19, 1988) with its reference to farcical triangle situations. I have been wondering about similarities and connections between Chaucer and George Eliot - Middlemarch (and Daniel Deronda) as almost Eliot's answer to Chaucer's "Marriage Group" of tales. The most concentrated and specific link seemed to be between the Merchant's Tale and the Casaubon-Dorothea - Will triangle. Given Eliot's interest in Chaucer (there are four Chaucer epigraphs in Middlemarch, three from comic contexts including one from the Wife's Prologue (ch. lxv) and one from the climax of the Miller's Tale (xii)) it's hardly possible that she wasn't aware of the similarity, if only at a submerged level. The beautiful young bride - the rich, physically unattractive older man, whose incongruity as her husband is revoltingly obvious though not to him - the garden in which much of the action occurs and in which (in Middlemarch) the young man - the husband's dependant - is first glimpsed. The way both January and Casaubon are reduced by physical disability (January losing his sight) to far greater dependence and no longer take their wives for granted. Each one's appeal to his wife's loyalty, January offering May all his heritage, "toun and tour", all to be signed "to-morwe er sonne reste"; Casaubon more sinisterly altering his will just in case.

Of course a vast distance separates Casaubon from January (and the same for the other characters) but some of the differences are piquant. For one thing the cuckolding is displaced from the sexual to the intellectual sphere. Casaubon's immediate and visceral emotions of desire and jealousy centre on his Key to all Mythologies, whilst he goes to the sixteenth-century sonneteers for advice on what his sexual emotions should be (Then he thinks of the sonneteers urging him to leave behind a copy of himself, his next thought is that "he had not yet succeeded in issuing copies of his mythological key" ch. xxix)

But also the differences often take the form of comic contrast, parody by opposites. January and Casaubon are both impatient to be married - the latter because of "the hindrance which courtship occasioned to the progress of his great work". January is eager to clear the house of wedding guests and set about May: Casaubon is keen to take Celia along on the honeymoon as company for Dorothea, and proves incapable even of the kisses and caresses of fatherly affection. May's clothes impede January's advances:

He wolde of hir , he seyde, han som plesaunce,  
And seyde hir clothes dide him encombraunce. (1959 f.)

Casaubon's clothes by their formality repel Dorothea's affectionate caresses:

Having made his clerical toilette with due care in the morning, he was prepared only for those amenities of life which were suited to the well adjusted stiff cravat of the period ...

Chaucer interestingly anticipates George Eliot's use of distorting metaphors through which characters look forward to marriage. Readers of Middlemarch need no reminders of Dorothea's view of Mr Casaubon's mind as an "ungauged reservoir", and the way she experiences from a pamphlet he has annotated "the scent of a fresh bouquet after a dry, hot, dreary walk". And Gwendolen Harleth looks forward to marriage with Grandcourt: she "wished to mount the chariot and drive the plunging horses herself, with a spouse at her side who would fold his arms and give her his countenance without looking ridiculous."

Casaubon (like Tertius Lydgate, whom he does not otherwise resemble) regards marriage as an ornamental border around a man's more serious concerns. (His view of his qualifications for marriage is also interesting: "his long studious bachelorhood had stored up for him a compound interest of enjoyment, and .. large drafts of his affections would not fail to be honoured" (ch. x) As he had written to Dorothea (ch. v), "I can at least offer you an affection hitherto unwasted".) To Lydgate marriage should be "reclining in a paradise with sweet laughs for bird-notes, and blue eyes for a heaven"; and Casaubon contemplates "that matrimonial garden scene where, as all experience showed, the path was to be bordered by flowers". His own literal garden is to be the melancholy Yew Tree Walk where Lydgate will reveal the gravity of his illness and where Dorothea will come too late to assure him of her loyalty.

January's walled garden (one of his "honest" architectural features) is purposebuilt by him to accommodate - weather permitting - his and May's intimacies. Chaucer invokes not only the Roman de la Rose but Priapus in its praise. January's inspiration is the Song of Solomon, which he quotes ecstatically. However, with a wider sexual experience than Casaubon's, he has a wider range of metaphors. His determination to marry a young girl is expressed:

Bet is .. a pyk than a pykereel (fully grown than young pike) And bet than old boef is the tendre veel. (1419 f.)

A woman of thirty is "bene-straw" and coarse fodder. A young girl can be moulded like "warm wax" (1430). He himself is in his sexual prime:

Though I be hoor, I fare as dooth a tree  
That blometh er that fruyt ywoxen bee;  
And blosmy tree nys neither drye ne deed. (1461-3)

The last two images recoil on him when May uses wax to make a spare key for the garden gate and cuckold January in a fruit-tree.

The image he didactically offers May in bed needs no narrative underlining, it just auto-destructs:

A man may do no sinne with his wyf,  
Ne hurte him-selven with his owne knyf.

And she soliloquises her resolve to love Damyan "best of any creature/ Though he namoore hadde than his sherte" (1984 f.) with as much romantic abandon as if she meant to tie her fortunes to his poverty, whereas she only means to secretly enjoy his company when he is stripped down to his shirt.

Chaucer would clearly endorse Eliot's comment that "we all of us .. get our thoughts entangled in metaphors and act fatally on the strength of them" (Middlemarch ch. x) (See of course also her great disquisition on metaphors of education in Mill on the Floss II.i) A related interest, indicated in the ironical parenthesis "as all experience showed" in Casaubon's contemplation of the matrimonial garden scene, is experience and authority. January trusts in the unthinking tradition of proverbs. (His foil is the Wife of Bath, a similarly aging sensualist who however eschews proverbs and habitually turns metaphors over and re-examines them, and who whilst she refers to old husbands as "bacon", equally refers to her own faded charms as bran:

The flour is goon, ..  
The bren, as I best kan, now moste I selle. (477 f.)

January's two advisers are no help to him as they both merely parrot opposing traditions without reference to his case.

Middlemarch has of course choric scenes where local worthies utter conventional wisdom; it has Mr Brooke who makes a virtue out of *cognitus interruptus* ("human reason may carry you a little too far - over the hedge, in fact" ch. ii) and Mrs Cadwallader, an individual voice raised in support of convention. But the central characters are individualists who disastrously trust received wisdom: Lydgate is explicitly scolded for accepting his vulgar neighbours' ideas on the place of women as he would not on the operations of fever (ch. xvi); Casaubon consults the sonneteers and (less crucially but characteristically) accepts received opinion on Renaissance painters. Rosamund aspires beyond the ordinary Middlemarch young man, but her desire to attract and impress someone superior makes her quick to identify, and conform to, external standards.

Chaucer and George Eliot converge also in their use of the mediating narrator. Both were admired as sources of detachable wisdom (see the frequent marginal "Auct" i.e. "Good point" in Chaucer manuscripts, and Alexander Main's collection of Eliotian wisdom in book form.) Both used the commenting narrator as a means to realism, bringing fiction into a closer relation with everyday life, e.g.

Have ye nat seyn somtyme a pale face  
Among a prees, of hym that hath be lad  
Toward his deeth ...? (Man of Law's Tale 645 ff.)  
Now mighte som envyous jangle thus,  
"This was a sodeyn love ... "  
I sey nought that she so sodeynly  
Yaf him hir love, but that she gan enclyne  
To lyke hym first ... (Troilus ii. 666 ff.)

At the same time both viewed the "detachable wisdom" bit ironically, and each developed a highly flexible "narrator" persona - naive and bookish butt, ponderously arch adducer of scientific analogy etc. On the whole Chaucer seems more willing to make the narrator totally unreliable and untrustworthy (the Merchant's Tale marks the extreme where, no longer in any way identified with "Chaucer", he indulges in mutually contradictory rhetorical exclamations); whereas George Eliot doesn't want ever to get so far into irony that she can't clasp the reader's hand and re-establish trust. This area seems to me to merit attention; I wonder whether it has been studied.

A lengthier version of this article appeared in the  
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