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Graham Handley

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MIDDLEMARCH AND BELINDA
by Graham Handley

Middlemarch and Rhoda Broughton’s Belinda (1883) have often been cited as benchmarks in the much wider debate concerning Mark Pattison and his wife Emily Francis, later Lady Dilke. Among other novels with alleged Pattison derivations are W. H. Mallock’s The New Republic (1877), Mrs Humphry Ward’s Robert Elsmere (1888), and Robert Liddell’s The Almond Tree (1938), the latter apparently deftly drawn from the Pattison papers in the Bodleian. Apologists occupying the Pattison patch include John Sparrow and Vivian Green, while Pattison’s own Memoirs (1885) are essential to any understanding of this alternately admired and vilified man. In his George Eliot: A Biography (1968) Gordon Haight included an appendix on Pattison to demonstrate that he was not the model for Casaubon: Rhoda Broughton’s Professor Forth, on the other hand, is accepted with certainty as being the Rector of Lincoln College, an apocryphal story being that he had himself announced by that name when he visited Rhoda at her Oxford home after publication of the novel. Similarly apocryphal is her taking offence when he suspected her of writing an anonymous letter which exposed his relationship with Meta Bradley: Belinda is supposedly Broughton’s revenge.

Here I wish merely to consider some of the contrasts and correspondences between Middlemarch and Belinda. The latter was Broughton’s eighth novel, her early, daring reputation well behind her. The two sisters of Belinda certainly have points of contrast with Dorothea and Celia. Dorothea is a wilful idealist, Belinda a wilful masochist; Belinda’s younger sister Sarah is a wilful flirt, at one time engaged – technically – to the miserly hypochondriac Professor Forth, whom Belinda later marries; Celia is a wilful realist who not only punctures the rayless Casaubon but also marries her sister’s discarded suitor Sir James Chettam with opportunistic verve. Thus far Broughton has read Middlemarch and reinvented Pattison.

In the outline of situation there are correspondences, but Casaubon is given a sympathetic depth which goes far beyond the register of character traits observed: he is character created. Broughton’s Professor Forth is conceived outwardly not inwardly, but her derivations from the Casaubon-Dorothea story in Middlemarch have not, I think, been fully explored. I am suggesting here a deliberate deployment of contrasts with an incisive and unremitting satirical thrust. The eponymous heroine of Broughton’s novel marries without love and without the intention of giving love: she feels – like Dorothea – that she will be assisting a great scholar in his work and that as a rewarding consequence she will acquire the essential truths of life and learning. But whereas Dorothea gives all for love, and finds the resultant intimacy humiliating, searing and poignantly self-educative, Belinda marries in reaction against the long silence of her departed lover whom she had treated with reflex repression, sometimes sarcasm, and often an assumed coldness which covered an inner warmth she is unable to convey. Here Broughton’s psychological probing is acute and moving: Belinda is her own worst enemy, for her inability to reveal her deep feelings derives in part from sibling interaction with her loquacious, witty, outspoken and successfully flirtatious sister Sarah. The latter always has a number of young men in tow, whether hussars in Dresden, where the novel opens, or undergradu-
ates in Oxbridge. Moreover, just as Celia’s carnal commentary on Dorothea puts the latter’s idealism into comic perspective, so Sarah’s running satire on Belinda’s love-lost state underpins her sister’s fallacious decision to marry Professor Forth. But Sarah, like Celia over Dorothea’s sad delusion, is compassionate and concerned for her serious sister.

Just as Celia and Dorothea are seen contrastingly, so Sarah and Belinda provide a telling commentary on each other’s proclivities. But while Celia seems born to domesticated aristocratic status when she marries Sir James, Sarah is refreshingly free from the need to be tied. Sarah plays the field and seems unlikely to become tenderly trapped, but Celia is naturally subsumed into wife and motherhood. Yet Sarah’s is not an immoral or irresponsible fling, rather a series of harmless gambits which fall short of commitment but bubble with the exercise of power. Broughton herself never married, though she obviously enjoyed the society of men; she and Henry James became close friends, delighting in each other’s company. He referred to her as ‘Our Dear Rhoda, our gallant and intrepid Rhoda’.

There are other connectives between the two novels. The sisters are each subjected to the contiguous voice of female bossiness: Mrs Cadwallader’s domestic economy does not extend to words, and she defines Casaubon in fluid astringency. She promotes and provokes Sir James’s resentment and disgust for his successful rival, but compensates by indicating Celia’s preference for him, thus initiating his proposal. By contrast, the formidable, insensitive, steam-rolling Miss Watson intrudes, spies, gossips, mauls situations and proscribes privacy, the vulgarity of her presence in Dresden, London, Oxbridge, stridently coincidental but, like Mrs Cadwallader’s, plot-moving, functional. But whereas Mrs Cadwallader has the substance of actuality, Miss Watson has the thick brush-strokes of caricature. In Belinda Granny Churchill has some equivalence to the bumbling Mr Brooke in inadequate guardianship of the two girls, but his self-interest is underscored by vacillation, whereas Granny’s is programmed – she wants holidays and warmth and opts sarcastically out of her granddaughter’s concerns though Belinda, overhearing her coveting a trip to Monaco, feels rejected, and pushes herself further towards marriage with Forth.

Even passing details like the presence of dogs provide contrasts: Dorothea, impetuous despite her principles, rejects Sir James’s offer of a Maltese terrier (she regards it as parasitic), and always prefers the company and comfort of the large St Bernard, Monk. In Belinda the dogs, delightfully named Slutty and Punch, have their habits indulged, their preferences, jealousies and resentments in some ways mirrored in the responses of their owners. The ironically named Slutty is as put upon and injured as Belinda.

Dorothea, as I have said, marries for love and finds frustration and humiliation: Belinda marries to serve, to learn, and indicates at the outset that she cannot love. In fact Belinda is a fascinating study in sibling reaction and decisive immaturity, but she is morally consistent and strives to do the right thing by her husband, who is incapable of responding. He simply has no affection to give, nothing outside his mean world of petty economy and pedantic transcription, sarcasm which is a little snarl of power, hypochondria which carries within itself the fatality he fears. Casaubon is different since he is within the sympathetic ambience of the narrator. His
narrowness admits an expansion of feeling and with it of frustration. Casaubon has a capacity for suffering which is seen after he has been made aware that his heart condition could be alleviated by a suitable adjustment of work-load on his part. Despite Dorothea’s loving sympathy Casaubon feels humiliated by what he recognizes as her adverse judgement of him: ‘His discontent passed vapour-like through all her gentle loving manifestations, and clung to that inap­preciative world which she had only brought nearer to him’. Knowing himself a failure and knowing too that he is doomed, Casaubon is brought movingly into focus for the reader by the polarization of his reactions: on the one hand he determines to forestall the probability of Will’s and Dorothea’s consummation after his death, while on the other he responds warmly, kindly, generously to Dorothea’s anguished waiting up for him. Here he comforts her with a sympathy which transcends his customary self-absorption: ‘When the kind, quiet melancholy of that speech fell on Dorothea’s ears, she felt something like the thankfulness that might well up in us if we had narrowly escaped hurting a lamed creature. She put her hand into her hus­band’s, and they went along the broad corridor together.’ The analogy is tremulous with feel­ing, for Casaubon is indeed lamed, and the final sentence is perhaps an ironic recollection of ‘They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow . . . ’. This closure to Book IV has despair mitigated by hope.

Casaubon’s approaching death is recorded with exemplary insight. The movement away from the compassion and giving suggested above is seen in the frenzied activity of his mind and his attempt to bind Dorothea to carrying out his wishes after his death regardless of her not knowing what they are. He coerces her to accept them, she promises to answer him the following day: when she reluctantly goes to him he sees that

> His arms were resting on the table, and his brow was bowed down on them,\n> the blue cloak being dragged forward and screening his face on each side . . .\n> Still he was motionless; and with a sudden confused fear she leaned down to him, took off his velvet cap, and leaned her cheek close to his head, crying in a distressed tone,\n> ‘Wake, dear, wake! Listen to me. I am come to answer.’\n> But Dorothea never gave her answer.\n>

In fact she answers much later, sealing up his Synoptical Tabulation in an envelope and writ­ing to her dead husband ‘*Do you not see now that I could not submit my soul to yours, by working hopelessly at what I have no belief in? – Dorothea.*’

Casaubon’s death promotes an upward dramatic curve which embraces its aftermath: his will both mars and makes, facilitates and resolves. *Middlemarch* is cohesive, interactive, measur­ing change, departures and discoveries replacing the arrivals and impacts of its early structure.

Forth’s death in *Belinda* is different in quality and effect. Belinda writes a note to him prior to setting off to meet her lover David Rivers at Keswick station: there has been one life-giving, love-giving kiss between David and herself. Belinda had been on the point of confessing her intention to Forth the previous evening: he observed that she looked feverish and ‘There is, or
she fancies it, a tone of kindness, almost compassion, in his voice'. But she inadvertently causes a blot of ink to fall on his work, thus angering him, and the moment is lost. As she says goodnight to him she thinks ‘Poor old man! How old and feeble and lonely he looks!' She writes a farewell note, takes the carriage in the middle of the night, all the while conscience-driven and saying ‘It is not too late!' She turns back, arrives at the hotel, retrieves her note and resolves to take it to her husband (‘This shall be her expiation’). She finds Professor Forth sitting back in his chair, head slightly forward. She speaks: ‘Her voice sounds strangely resonant in this silent room. There is no answer... Conquering the nameless, senseless dread of approaching him that has come over her, she walks firmly up to him, and laying her hand on his arm, stoops and looks into his face. The next instant a sharp shriek rings through the hotel, and when frightened visitors and chambermaids, hurrying from all quarters, reach the room, they find Mrs Forth lying stretched on the floor beside her husband, as inanimate as he. Only that in time they bring her round again. As for him, he has for ever vindicated his character from the imputation of being a malade imaginaire, and the Professorship of Etruscan in the University of Oxbridge is vacant!' This ending, as in some of her other novels, shows Broughton striving for the ultimate dramatic effect – here the graphic present – but going outside the narrative frame. Despite the febrile prose and the flip verbal swipe, the open ending has a provocative ambiguity – will Belinda overcome her conscience and join her lover or will she continue to endure the self-suffering she promoted?

That Broughton read Eliot and observed the Pattison marriage there is no doubt. But, as we should expect, Eliot is in full control of her fictional material, the sympathetic animation always present. Middlemarch is a wise, compassionate and timeless novel despite its firm anchorage in historical actuality and perspective: Belinda is a caustically structured analysis of a loveless marriage. Emily Pattison, (addressed as Figliuolina by Eliot in some letters), became Emilia Dilke, distinguished art critic, a tireless worker on behalf of her sex (she was President of the Women’s Trade Union League from 1886 until her death in 1904). She transcended Dorothea in the public exercise of her giving which made her a foundress of much. Mark Pattison died in 1884, his wife marrying Dilke in the following year. Pattison wrote Eliot a moving letter some little time after the death of Lewes. Rhoda Broughton lived on to write what Sadleir has defined as her best novels, examinations of society and relationships which are pithy, witty, with a mordant irony and superb sense of dialogue, the single volume length which replaced the three-decker marathons well suited to her refined focus. Broughton observed that she began life as Zola, and finished it as Miss Yonge. It is a typical piece of self-mockery, a quality which, I feel, is never absent from her work. But Belinda is far from negligible, and Tamie Watters, in an exemplary introduction to it, notes ‘the art and maturity she brings to the old theme’. Eliot had explored the ‘old theme’ with compassion and insight, indexing the inward with deft selectivity: Broughton’s subtle comedy of manners gives way to an acid analysis of a loveless marriage. The reduction of her heroine is anguished, unrelieved, but profoundly moving.
Notes


5. Sparrow, 6.

6. Middlemarch, Ch. 42.

7. ibid, ch. 42.

8. John Milton, Paradise Lost (1667), Book XII, l. 648.


10. ibid, ch. 54.

11. Belinda, Period IV, Ch. 5.

12. ibid, Period IV, Ch. 5.

13. ibid, Period IV, Ch. 6.

14. ibid, Period IV, Ch. 6.

15. ibid, Period IV, Ch. 6.


17. See Israel for a postmodernist evaluation of the many facets of her life and work.

18. Letters, IX, 257, 18 January 1879: ‘I may safely say not a day passes, but a thought of you comes across me’.

19. See Michael Sadleir, Things Past (Constable, 1944). The chapter on Rhoda Broughton (84-116) is still an excellent introduction to her fiction.

20. R. C. Terry, Victorian Popular Fiction 1860-80 (Macmillan, 1983), 131, where he quotes her as saying that ‘when she was young she was Zola, and now she’s Zola [older] she’s Yonge’.

21. Introduction to Belinda (Virago, 1984), viii.