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## CASAUBON'S IMPOTENCE: A LITERARY LIBEL?

By Marianne Burton

There are some literary hypotheses which so suit readers' impressions of a text that they become accepted almost as literary fact, as if they were stated in the text itself or had been confirmed by the author in an interview, letter or notebook. This seems to have become the case with Edward Casaubon's sexual impotence in *Middlemarch*. Gordon Haight complained that undergraduates 'despite a generation of sex-education' never failed to describe Casaubon as impotent simply by virtue of his age. Casaubon was around forty-eight. Haight was seventy-three when he wrote this essay, and indignantly listed the famous men who had sired children at advanced ages (1974: 255).

So closely does impotence fit perceptions of Casaubon's marriage with Dorothea Brooke that it may seem a whimsical notion that it should be reconsidered. Some commentators treat the matter as if it were a settled case, as in Diana Culbertson's bold statement that 'there are clear suggestions that Casaubon is impotent' (1989:106), while others, such as Edward Alexander, go further and describe him as 'the impotent Casaubon' (2012:187), in the manner of classical writers using repeated formulaic epithets to convey characters' overriding characteristics, such as 'swift-footed Achilles' or 'pious Aeneas'. A. D. Nuttall, in his suggestively entitled study of scholars and sex, *Dead from the Waist Down* (2003), argues that although the reader cannot be certain, since the sex was clearly so disastrous, Casaubon may as well be deemed impotent. So are there 'clear suggestions' indicating Casaubon's sexual impotence? Or is this just a literary libel that has become semi-accepted as literary truth?

I was trained originally as a lawyer, so I will start by considering the legal significance of sexual impotence in its relation to marriage. Non-consummation does not render a marriage void, i.e. without legal effect, as with bigamy or incest. A marriage may remain unconsummated for many reasons, including agreement between the parties, and if both parties are content then that marriage is valid. An unconsummated marriage is however voidable, so one or both parties may request a court to declare the marriage void. Effie Ruskin famously asked that her marriage should be dissolved for non-consummation by reason of her husband's impotence. The Ruskin annulment occurred in 1854, seventeen years before *Middlemarch's* publication, and the participants' celebrity caused the incident to stay alive in public gossip for many years. If Eliot were writing a novel with a non-consummated marriage at its core, then the Ruskin marriage would be likely to be present in her mind as an example. Tony Honoré's *Sex Law* provides a definition of consummation:

To consummate the marriage means to have sexual intercourse at least once. The requirements for this are stricter than are needed to establish a case of rape. The husband's penis must penetrate the wife's vagina if not to its full extent at least to a certain depth. [...] A slight penetration, or one which lasts only a moment or two, is not enough. It has been said that intercourse must be 'ordinary and complete, not partial and imperfect' [...]. The reason given is that neither husband nor wife would generally speaking be satisfied with less, so they would resort to adulterous relations unless the marriage could be set aside. (1978:17)

In addition to the legal implications, in the nineteenth century sexual relations and the production of children were seen as part of the fulfilment of the religious duties of marriage,

which was deemed a sacrament as much as a civic arrangement. Hence the noted fecundity of clerical marriages in life and in literature such as Eliot's Amos Barton and Anthony Trollope's Mr. Quiverful.

One must state immediately that no one denies that Dorothea is neglected socially:

'I am very glad that my presence has made any difference to you,' said Dorothea, who had a vivid memory of evenings in which she had supposed that Mr. Casaubon's mind had gone too deep during the day to be able to get to the surface again. (ch. 20)

Nor does anyone argue that Casaubon is a skilled and sympathetic lover. Casaubon boasts to Dorothea in his letter of proposal that he can offer her 'an affection hitherto unwasted' with 'no backward pages whereon, if you choose to turn them, you will find records such as might justly cause you either bitterness or shame' (ch. 5). Nor can we suppose him affectionate since he finds Dorothea's daytime kisses 'crude and startling' (ch. 20). Haight draws an intriguing assumption:

Through the turbulent imagery in which Dorothea clothes her thoughts a sympathetic reader perceives that her initiation into matrimony had been violent and painful. To have done it differently called for more tact and tenderness than the novice Casaubon possessed. (260)

Whether or not one agrees with this view, it is difficult to argue against Haight's view that Casaubon can 'never [have] felt a strong sexual interest in women' (258) or he would not have waited so long to gratify it. But is this enough to assume impotence? Casaubon does have a weak heart, although the word 'sickly', used frequently of Bulstrode, is only attached to Casaubon after his death. Casaubon was not a natural candidate by the views of the time for impotence, since that tended to be linked to, *inter alia*, smoking, drinking, obesity, and most particularly to masturbation (Acton *passim*), all of which Casaubon's lifestyle seems to rule out. Nevertheless it is a relevant point, and Lydgate may well have suggested abstinence, or at least restraint, following Casaubon's collapse ('men with weak hearts have died in the act', Acton, 1875: III:II:IV:182).

Two aspects of the impotence hypothesis then need to be considered: first whether the Casaubon marriage was consummated at all, and second whether marital relations continued after consummation. A single episode of penetrative sex might prevent the marriage being legally voidable, but that would hardly be enough to refute commentators in their epithetical dubbing of Casaubon as impotent. As in a libel case, it seems sensible to put up primary counsel for the defence and prosecution, and see what evidence they produce to support their claims. I have designated Barbara Hardy as counsel for the prosecution and Patricia Beer as counsel for the defence, with other commentators brought in along the way.

Barbara Hardy was not, as she admits, the first to maintain that Casaubon was impotent. In 1963 David Daiches wrote, 'The suggestion of sexual impotence, to match Dorothea's sexual ignorance, is irresistible' (21). Nevertheless Hardy's name is often put forward as one of the strongest adherents of the impotence theory, and she is a persuasive exponent, dedicating fifteen pages to the proposition in her 1964 essay 'Implication and Incompleteness in *Middlemarch*' (reprinted in *Particularities*, 1982:17-32). Hardy reminds the reader that impotence is a hypothesis only, 'Eliot never tells us that Casaubon is impotent' (18). She also emphasizes that focusing on sexual impotence can overstress its importance, 'This is

a part of the story, but not the whole' (18), 'when we isolate a theme we inevitably appear to exaggerate its prominence' (19). But despite these caveats, Hardy is satisfied that impotence is likely to have been Eliot's intent, in that it answers many outstanding questions about the marriage.

Hardy argues that without sexual impotence there is a gap in the narrative, in that the early onset of Casaubon's polite neglect and Dorothea's depression cannot be explained. It would explain Casaubon's 'exceedingly shallow rill' of feeling, and his belief that there must be a deficiency in Dorothea responsible for 'the moderation of his abandonment' (although these are comments from Chapter 7 regarding Casaubon's courtship, not Chapter 20 which dissects the post-marriage period). Hardy points out this incompatibility is presented against a background of 'highly critical comment' from the secondary characters which is 'frankly physical' about Casaubon (22); the accumulated voices of Chettam, Cadwallader, Celia and Ladislav present to the reader what the narrator cannot say, that the marriage will not be consummated. Casaubon himself worries that any show of jealousy will confirm people in what he suspects they already think of his marital 'disadvantages'. It is only the reticence of the period which prevents Eliot from being more explicit herself. Hardy also points out that when the Casaubons, jointly and severally, ponder sharing family money with Ladislav, neither considers the possibility of children, although Casaubon's will is drawn up in expectation of issue. (Although these deliberations do take place after Casaubon's collapse, when intercourse may well have ceased.) Hardy cites the repeated imagery of children, the elfin child withered at birth (ch. 68), the Solomon's judgement of Ladislav torn between Rosamond and Dorothea (ch. 80), and Celia's baby and Rosamond's miscarriage, as inviting the reader to consider why Dorothea has no children. Eliot's main emphasis on the marriage failure may be 'emotional, not physical' (20), but, according to Hardy, without sexual impotence the unhappiness has no real focus:

Whatever ambiguity and evasion may at times come from the convention of reticence, the double emphasis on emotional and physical deficiency, on the one hand, and sterility, on the other, appear to converge in only one probable explanation. It may be that the adult Victorian reader found the suggestion more plainly pronounced than the modern reader, having fewer cases of sexual frankness before him, being more accustomed to implicit rather than explicit sexual themes, and having no hardened prejudices about the limitations of the Victorian novel. [...] We cannot definitely say that the marriage is never consummated, but since Dorothea's nervous misery begins in Rome, this seems highly probable. (27)

Patricia Beer in an essay on sexual euphemism, 'Elizabeth Bennet's Fine Eyes' (Enright, 1985), interprets Eliot's wording and intentions differently. In her view, to those who understand nineteenth-century euphemism, Eliot's narrative is clear on the point that sexual relations did indeed occur. Beer's argument is succinct and I cite it almost in full:

Someone was telling me that nowadays they positively teach students doing *Middlemarch* (1871-2) for A-levels that [Casaubon's] marriage to Dorothea was not consummated. This is nonsense. The text is discreet, certainly, but I should have thought unequivocal: 'he had not found marriage a rapturous state but he had no idea of being anything else than an irreproachable husband, who would make a charming young woman as happy as she deserved to be.' Casaubon was not so unworldly as to think that

a bride who was still virgin after six weeks of marriage would not be bewildered and distressed. Even Ruskin in such circumstances was ready with self-justification. And it is expressly stated that Dorothea 'had no distinctly shapen grievance that she could state even to herself': non-consummation would have been one [...]. No one would dispute that he is presented as an inexperienced and not very ardent lover, or doubt that he finds sexual intercourse disappointing, but Dorothea is not Effie Ruskin, her troubles are more complex. (118-9)

Although undergraduates are generally shown the two hypotheses, it is not uncommon, as Beer mentions, for them to be nudged towards the pro-impotence camp. Nora Tomlinson, in the Open University undergraduate textbook on the realist novel, brings the question back to Dorothea's distress and the gloomy backdrop of Rome, suggesting impotence is implied by these two factors:

Many readers have felt that that Eliot intended them to understand Mr Casaubon to be impotent, citing Dorothea's distress on her honeymoon in Rome as evidence. [...] Evidence of her husband's impotence is indirect, contained in the imagery of dank gloom referred to above, in the 'chill, colourless, narrowed landscape' [(ch. 28)] of her married home, and in the total lack of physical warmth between them. (2000:268)

Tomlinson suggests this textual support for the impotence theory :

when the narrator goes on to express sorrow at his lack of powerful feeling, so that he is 'never to be fully possessed by the glory we behold, never to have our consciousness rapturously transformed into the vividness of a thought, the ardour of a passion' [(ch. 29)], she seems not only to be hinting at his impotence but also allowing that it is a tragedy for him as well as for Dorothea. (269)

So was gloom so rare on Victorian honeymoons that impotence must be the cause? Helen Michie's 2006 study *Victorian Honeymoons: Journeys to the Conjugal* examines nineteenth-century narratives to try to establish what represented typical experience. It is clear from these accounts, especially those including the Grand Tour, that the time was a difficult one for relationships irrespective of sex. Travelling abroad presented a multiplicity of problems, with frequent ill health due to change of water, food and standards of cleanliness. Newly-weds were thrown into close proximity with a member of the opposite sex at a time when the genders were largely socially – let alone sexually – segregated. Absence from male friends and work was often boring for the man, as it was for Casaubon. Absence from female family and friends was often disconcerting for the bride, who had to deal with menstruation and feminine hygiene while sharing a bedroom with a virtual stranger. Michie points out how often honeymoon journals report brides left alone indoors while the husband is out hiking or visiting sites. The disorientation of the couple in *Middlemarch* seems from Michie's research to be a stark representation of many Victorian honeymoons. Furthermore the evidence points to gloom among new brides being more often caused by consummation than non-consummation (4, 113). Acton may have been correct when he suggested a newly married Victorian woman, exhausted by the wedding itself, 'would be generally only too happy for the first few days to dispense with what in most instances is to her, at least, a most painful and distressing climax to her other agitations' (1865:III:I:II:108).

Like Beer, I belong to the anti-impotence camp on the basis of *Middlemarch*'s text. It seems to me that Eliot speaks plainly, if decorously, of the consummation of the marriage. As

well as the passage quoted above by Beer about Casaubon being an 'irreproachable husband' (ch. 20), Eliot gives readers this (my italics):

The deeper he went in domesticity the more did the sense of *acquitting himself and acting with propriety* predominate over any other satisfaction. Marriage, like religion and erudition, nay, like authorship itself, was fated to become *an outward requirement*, and Edward Casaubon was bent on fulfilling *unimpeachably all requirements*. (ch. 29)

The phrase 'acquitting himself and acting with propriety' would certainly include having intercourse, and any husband 'bent on fulfilling unimpeachably all requirements' would recognize intercourse as the most crucial requirement. Intercourse was by law *the* defining requirement which made a marriage not voidable. I regard these phrases as compelling, not least because Eliot repeats this formula so often, as with 'Mr. Casaubon, we know, had a sense of rectitude and an honourable pride in satisfying the requirements of honour' (ch. 42). Michie agrees:

While critics have long assumed that Casaubon was impotent and the Casaubon marriage unconsummated, his preoccupation with 'forms' suggests to me a rigid adherence to conjugal duty. (2006:88)

Moreover Eliot's words seem to indicate that sex was not a single event, but frequent enough for Casaubon to believe that he was acting unimpeachably and Dorothea should be happy. A single act of intercourse could not justify him in that thought and Casaubon was not stupid, whatever else he may have been. His irritation with Dorothea arises precisely because she has no reason to complain. Hence his reaction to Dorothea's fit of temper (my italics):

to Mr. Casaubon it was a new pain, he never having been on a wedding journey before, or found himself in that *close union* which was more of a subjection than he had been able to imagine, since this charming young bride [...] obliged him to much consideration on her behalf (*which he had sedulously given*). (ch. 20)

'Close union' is likely to mean a sexual relationship here, because Eliot is contrasting his previous inexperience with women with his 'close union' with Dorothea. If they have had no sexual relations, Eliot must be indicating that they live in a 'close union' like brother and sister, through simple proximity, and that he has 'sedulously given' her every consideration except that necessity which would have made them man and wife. This would seem to be misleading her readers, which seems unlikely for such a fastidious writer.

One argument often given by commentators who favour the non-consummation hypothesis, including Hardy, is that no novelist at Eliot's time could be explicit on such a subject. However the consummation and non-consummation of marriage is discussed in other nineteenth-century novels, although admittedly not frequently and certainly euphemistically. In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë has Jane muse that a marriage to St. John Rivers would not be one of convenience but consummated:

Can I receive from him the bridal ring, endure all the forms of love (which I doubt not he would scrupulously observe) and know that the spirit was quite absent? (ch. 34)

Sophia Lee's 1804 novel *The Life of A Lover* includes a long narrative about a marriage of convenience, 'a rite wholly nominal' (IV:146), with the bride's subsequent horror when the

elderly groom unilaterally decides to rescind that agreement, and secondary characters' reactions following his death. In Mary Webb's 1917 *Gone to Earth*, the heroine's marriage is unconsummated: 'this marriage which was no marriage' (ch. 15). Nearer to the date of *Middlemarch*, Wilkie Collins's 1852 *Basil* revolves round an unconsummated marriage expressed in many different euphemistic wordings. The father of the bride explains it to the bridegroom in this way:

'I want you and my dear girl to be married at once, and yet not to be married exactly, for another year. I don't know whether you understand me?'

'I must confess I do not.' [...]

'I require you to give me your word of honour to leave her at the church door; and for the space of one year never to attempt to see her, except in the presence of a third party. At the end of that time, I will engage to give her to you, as your wife in fact, as well as in name.' (ibid.) (I:XI)

Basil's wife is not pleased by this arrangement: 'Ha! ha! he calls himself a man, doesn't he? A husband who waits a year!' (3:VII). And her adultery before consummation so upset lending libraries that they banned the novel. It seems to me rather belittling of Eliot's skill to assume that she could not have found euphemisms decorous enough to instruct knowledgeable readers that the Casaubon marriage was one 'in name' but not 'in fact', had she wished such a thing to be understood. I do not disagree with, say, Nancy Henry when she suggests that forbidden topics in the nineteenth-century novel such as homosexuality 'needed to be encoded through literary allusions' (2012: 230), but consummation of marriage was not a forbidden topic. It was certainly delicate, but no more so than Hetty's fornication and pregnancy, Mrs Transome's adultery, or the illegitimate children of Henleigh Grandcourt and Lawyer Wakem:

Not that Mr. Wakem had not other sons beside Philip; but toward them he held only a chiaroscuro parentage, and provided for them in a grade of life duly beneath his own. (*The Mill on the Floss*: Bk 3: ch. 7)

I would in addition suggest there is an important narrative reason why the reader should assume consummation took place, and that is Dorothea's subsequent relationship with Ladislaw. If the Casaubon marriage were one in name only, if Dorothea were not truly 'a girl who had lately become a wife' (XX), then Dorothea marries Ladislaw as a virgin, as a sexually uninitiated woman. Thomas Hardy's narrative poem 'The Bride-Night Fire' was published shortly after *Middlemarch* in 1875 (although written a decade earlier) and has exactly this scenario occur. The poem's heroine turns to the congregation at the altar of her second marriage and declares 'I stand as a maiden today', to stop her husband being mocked for being second to her first elderly husband. If Eliot's intention were that Dorothea married Ladislaw as a virgin, one might expect some more substantial hint to be given. It would be significant. Casaubon would not then have been Dorothea's true husband; her mistake, and tragedy, would be less. 'No one would ever know what [Dorothea] thought of a wedding journey to Rome' (ch. 28) we are told, so not even Will. But if she were a virgin, one must assume she would tell him that. And crucially, when Dorothea faces Rosamond with her moving speech about marriage, 'Marriage is so unlike everything else. There is something even awful in the nearness it brings' (ch. 81), she would be speaking from a position of ignorance about that nearness. It is surely because Dorothea has experienced sexual congress that this statement is so painful as she searches for



polite euphemisms that might be exchanged in the drawing room from one Victorian wife to another.

Barbara Hardy says, 'Casaubon is, like Sir Clifford Chatterley, a cluster of different kinds of impotence' (28), but whereas Chatterley was stated as being physically impotent, Casaubon is not. I think Casaubon's intellectual and emotional impotence makes it tempting for readers to throw the net wider and want, for the sake of neatness, to include sexual impotence. But that is not what Eliot's writing describes. He is not the 'impotent Casaubon', for, like Beer, I think Eliot does tell us plainly through the text that sex did take place: 'His antipathy to Will did not spring from the common jealousy of a winter-worn husband' (ch. 37). I would submit however that a formulaic epithet for Casaubon can be justified. Sexually, emotionally and academically, he is the 'sterile Casaubon'. Dorothea's marriage leaves her nothing to look forward to in life, not companionship nor usefulness nor children; she too is 'waiting for death' to use Eliot's suggestive chapter title. If one focuses on Casaubon's sexual inadequacy it is this sterility, his inability to give Dorothea a child, that presents the problem. A child would have given Dorothea a purpose, a release from 'the stifling oppression of that gentlewoman's world, where everything was done for her and none asked for her aid'. Indeed Eliot immediately follows that phrase with this (my italics):

where the sense of connection with a manifold *pregnant* existence had to be kept up painfully as an inward vision, instead of coming from without in claims that would have shaped her energies. (ch. 28)

That word 'pregnant' reinforces readers' understanding of Dorothea's problem, her desperate need for work and for affection.

No one disagrees with Hardy when she says 'I think we must say that Casaubon is sexually very inadequate' (1982: 27). Eliot tells us that Casaubon is concerned with 'acquitting himself worthily, but only of acquitting himself' (ch. 20) and I suggest it was this peremptory dutiful sex that, *inter alia*, led to Dorothea's 'inward fits of anger and repulsion' (ibid.). I have personally always found Eliot's insistent wording on Casaubon doing his duty rather chilling, and thought Dorothea more likely to be unhappy because Casaubon *does* make love to her than because he does not. It would seem a little convoluted for non-consummation to cause fits of repulsion in a new bride unless accompanied by something more, and Casaubon, as Rosemary Ashton says, may be unattractive but he 'is not a monster' (2014:15). I suggest there is a gentle humour in Eliot's explanation that the couple's distress at rows was due to neither having been on a honeymoon journey before; suggesting that, if they had, they would have realized disagreements were completely normal. Hence the experienced Mrs Cadwallader's warnings to Celia against honeymooning abroad, '[new married couples] get tired to death of each other, and can't quarrel comfortably, as they would at home' (ch. 28). Dorothea was emotionally and socially neglected and Casaubon's erudition was not as elevated as she had hoped, but it is lack of companionship and affection she lacks, not sex. Eliot is as explicit as she can be that Casaubon fulfils his role 'with his unfailing propriety' (ch. 20); sex occurs, not blissful sex, but a pragmatic utilitarian consummation fulfilling legal requirements. How unpleasant that must have been.

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