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2015

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Burton, Marianne, "How much did Dorothea and Celia know? Sexual ignornace and knowledge among unmarried girls in Middlemarch" (2015). *The George Eliot Review*. 668.

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## HOW MUCH DID DOROTHEA AND CELIA KNOW? SEXUAL IGNORANCE AND KNOWLEDGE AMONG UNMARRIED GIRLS IN *MIDDLEMARCH*

By Marianne Burton

[*This article was first presented as a paper at the George Eliot Conference at the Institute of English Studies, Senate House, University of London, 22 November 2014.*]

Readers, in my experience, often make an assumption that unmarried girls in nineteenth-century novels know nothing about sex, and this seems to be particularly the case regarding Dorothea Brooke. Had she only known about sex, so the adage goes, she would never have made her disastrous marriage choice. In this article I would like to examine this assumption in closer detail, looking not just at Dorothea and Celia, but also Rosamond Vincy and Mary Garth. I do not necessarily want to turn the notion on its head – I am not going to claim these girls were closet readers of de Sade – but I would like to open up the field a little and suggest sexual ignorance among unmarried girls in the nineteenth-century novel may not be as straightforward as readers sometimes imagine.

There is a tendency to regard nineteenth-century sexual knowledge and ignorance as binary concepts, you either knew about sex or you didn't. It is much more complicated than this. Helena Michie in her 2006 monograph, *Victorian Honeymoons: Journey to the Conjugal*, entitles one of her chapters 'Carnal Knowledges' to emphasize the multitude of knowledges that were possible and how difficult it is to formulate modern day generalizations about nineteenth-century sexual knowledge, even after marriage. What did a Victorian wife know and what did a Victorian husband know? What did they assume each other knew? How much conversation did couples have about what they knew, felt or liked, or what their sexual experience had been prior to marriage (if any)? What did the family doctor know and what did he advise? Did he, for example, know about female orgasm, or advise couples about natural methods of contraception such as withdrawal or intercrural sex? What advice would have been given by friends, siblings and parents? Whatever assumptions we make when reading a novel, we are almost certainly not considering the full extent of our historical ignorance on the subject.

Any discussion of historical sexual knowledge is complicated by lack of evidence; the notorious Victorian reticence on sex means there are few interviews, reputable writings or statistics on the subject. In addition people were (and are) not always truthful or sufficiently explicit on such a sensitive matter. This lack of primary source evidence is particularly evident regarding women's sexual knowledge and experience. Some does exist, such as diaries and letters between women, but much was destroyed because women's social writings were not considered sufficiently important to preserve. And where a woman was considered important, as with Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë or George Eliot, her papers and letters tended to be heavily censored, in case any mention of intimate matters impacted negatively on her reputation. Medical books and articles from this period, and earlier, are almost exclusively written by men, as are most fictional depictions of women's sexual experience, such as *Fanny Hill*. One of the best sources for authenticity of women's sexual knowledge and conversation is accounts of trials, not least because women were on oath to tell the truth, which is why the

account of the Ruskins' marriage is so often cited.

In an attempt to move away from a binary concept of sexual knowledge, and to simplify discussion by defining my terms, for the purposes of this article I am going to suggest a threefold categorization of 'Carnal Knowledges'. I should emphasize that I am only talking about knowledge relating to standard heterosexual sex. There was, for example, a big fuss in the 1880s about sexual ignorance specifically relating to syphilis, with articles published in *The Lancet* and *British Medical Journal*, but that is not part of my remit here. My Category One is the act of penetration – the wedding night event. It is an easy categorization because it consists of one specific fact. There are, of course, a great many permutations of knowledge about this one act but, for simplicity's sake, it can be treated as a binary. You knew it happened or you didn't.

Category Two is everything relating to standard heterosexual sex apart from the act of penetration and knowledge related to that, i.e. that there are genital differences between men and women, that women have babies and breastfeed them, that you need a father as well as a mother to have a baby, and that there are illegitimate children.

Category Three is somewhat different. It is the knowledge that sexual feeling is important to you. You have had an experience which works as a sexual awakening. That might come through knowledge of your own body, through masturbation, through the sexual act itself, through falling in love, or through a kiss. This was why the kiss was such a sexually fraught area in the nineteenth-century novel, because it might fulfil this function: one famous example is Lily Dale's ecstatic reaction to Adolphus Crosbie in Anthony Trollope's *The Small House at Allington* (1864). Conversely the sexual act itself did not cause an inevitable awakening of sexual desire. Many nineteenth-century wives felt little or no sexual desire for their husbands, according to medical literature, a condition nowadays called ISD or inhibited sexual desire.

There is no doubt that sexual ignorance among unmarried women did exist. Effie Ruskin's narrative of the failure of her marriage states that she was sexually ignorant at the time of her marriage: 'I had never been told the duties of married persons to each other and knew little or nothing about their relations in the closest union on earth' (Cook 2004: 97). William Acton in his treatise *Prostitution* wrote, 'Many – far more than would generally be believed – fall from pure unknowingness' (1857: 32). John Chapman's diary for 1851 records a discussion in the publisher's household, which included George Eliot:

Last evening Miss Lynn's novel [*Realities*] gave rise to a discussion concerning the expediency of giving or withholding from girls, when the[y] reach puberty, a knowledge of the nature and consequences of the sexual function and its uses and abuses; comprehending of course careful instruction and guidance in respect to their relation with the male sex. Opinion preponderated in favour of giving such instruction. (Haight 1940: 174-5)

The famous 'young girl' standard for Victorian novels insisted that sexual ignorance was to be presumed in children and unmarried women, and authors must ensure no novel would enlighten them. 'Remember the country parson's daughters. I have always to remember them', Leslie Stephen, editor of *The Cornhill*, warned Thomas Hardy (Maitland 1906: 275). It is interesting to note, however, that this assumption was often followed by the caveat that sexual knowledge did exist, but that it was flawed knowledge, not acquired from institutionally

approved sources such as teachers and parents, but from other young people and from 'lewd jest or obscene print' (*BMJ* 1885).

*Middlemarch* was written in the 1870s but set 1829 to 1832, with Eliot including specific dating references such as William Huskisson's death in September 1830 (Ch. 41). This complicates matters, because it is the equivalent of writing a novel in 1970 about the sexual knowledge of girls living in the 1920s-30s. Making a very generalized point on this, the trajectory of nineteenth-century sexual knowledge seems to have been the opposite of the twentieth century's. While in the twentieth century sexual knowledge became more widespread as the century wore on, in the nineteenth century sexual knowledge seems to have dwindled as the century advanced. Hera Cook, in *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception, 1800-1975*, writes:

During the nineteenth century upper-middle-class sexual culture shifted substantially. In the early decades women and men were often aware of the possibility of physical passion and subdued their sexual desires with difficulty. By the middle decades of the century [...] respectable women were expected to control their sexual feelings. By the later decades of the nineteenth century, there appears to have been considerable female and some male ignorance of physical sexual activity along with diminishing mutual sexual pleasure. (2004: 100-101)

As the century wore on, people married later, there were fewer marriages, there was a falling birth rate, and significantly there were fewer babies conceived during the engagement period before marriage.

Pausing here, perhaps the most important point to make about this topic is that, before the two major changes in sexual knowledge, i.e. sexual education in schools (say, 1980s) and the arrival of the internet (say, 1990s), there appears to have been no 'normal' about sexual knowledge among unmarried girls. One girl might be sexually ignorant, but one cannot assume her sister or best friend had a similar lack of knowledge. Different families, different friends, different schools, produced different results. Henry James's 1898 *The Awkward Age* has a plot which revolves round this scenario, where two friends have entirely different knowledge bases. Nanda is sexually knowledgeable, whereas Aggie is sexually innocent. Henry James makes the point that being sexually knowledgeable has nothing to do with how nice or refined you are – you don't always seek sexual knowledge, it can be thrust upon you. 'A little drain-pipe with everything flowing through' is the metaphor Nanda uses of herself. And in a way, that is one of the major points of this article, that it is tendentious to make sweeping assumptions about sexual knowledge in a historic or literary period. Families differed. Girls differed. One sister might know, one might not.

There were various ways in which unmarried girls in the 1830s might have been exposed to information about sex, and I would like to examine these various methods in relation to the four *Middlemarch* girls.

First of all, none of the four girls was socially isolated. They were not heavily chaperoned and restricted to city houses, as were, for example, James's sexually ignorant Aggie or Edith Wharton's May Welland in *The Age of Innocence* set in 1870s New York. All four girls moved freely round *Middlemarch*, riding, walking, visiting neighbours and the poor. They would have seen public urination, particularly among little boys: in William Hogarth's *The Enraged Musician* (1741) a girl of about four years old looks with amazement at a boy of

similar age urinating below the musician's window. The girls would have witnessed breastfeeding, and would have seen children bathing nude in the summer, and possibly men as well. Mary and Rosamond played freely together with Fred as children, and both girls have younger siblings, so they will have at least witnessed, and more probably been actively involved with, bathing and toilet training. There is nothing to point to any of the four girls being around animals a great deal, or I would include that as another method of learning about sexual behaviour. Acton wrote about both men and women, 'many would be entirely ignorant, but for previously incontinent habits [i.e. masturbation], or such notions as they pick up from watching the practices of animals' (*Functions and Disorders* 1865. Section entitled 'Sexual Intercourse in Marriage').

Mary Garth acted as nurse for the essentially bedridden Featherstone, and it is highly likely she would have undertaken chamber pot duties. No one in Middlemarch thinks this indelicate. The 1830s was not yet a prudish time, especially in country towns. Home nurses were often employed, but when family members fell ill, female relatives were supposed to fall to and help out. It was the female role. It is significant that Mary is twenty-two, an age at which she would have been regarded as a woman, bound to assist in domestic duties and not to be too fancy-minded. Whether or not Mary knew the mechanics of sex, she knew the baseness of the body and she knew the difference between men and women.

Reading was another way girls informed themselves. Charlotte Brontë, aged eighteen, sent Ellen Nussey a reading list:

Now Ellen don't be startled at the names of Shakespeare, and Byron. Both these were great Men and their works are like themselves. You will know how to chuse the good and avoid the evil, the finest passages are always the purest, the bad are invariably revolting you will never wish to read them over twice. (4 July 1834)

There is no indication in this letter that Ellen would not understand the revolting passages, and indeed if Charlotte herself had not understood them, she would hardly have been able to warn Ellen. I imagine Charlotte Brontë acquired her information from a combination of reading, conversation with other women and from Bramwell. Before the internet teenage girls frequently learnt about sex by sneaking a look at the books of their parents and older siblings. If you interview older women today about their sexual education, that interesting pile of magazines under their brother's bed is a common memory. I am not suggesting that Fred Vincy kept a copy of that nineteenth-century pornographic favourite *The Lustful Turk* under his bed, but I am suggesting that information was passed between siblings, and boys who had attended school had more information to pass, as with Lydgate whose 'liberal education had of course left him free to read the indecent passages in the school classics' and imbued him with 'a general sense of secrecy and obscenity in connection with his internal structure' (Ch. 15). Brooke's house would have contained many books that might have informed the girls, and also possibly sketches and statues that were educational in this way. I cannot believe Celia was much of a reader, but Dorothea was eager to find education 'beyond the shallows of ladies' school literature' (Ch. 3) and had read old theological books and Milton. There is quite a lot of sex in the Bible and *Paradise Lost*; not technical descriptions of anatomical activity, but enough to pique the curiosity of an intelligent reader. You do not have to read *Tom Jones*, or *Humphrey Clinker* as Brooke recommends to the married Casaubons, to pick up hints.

We know Celia and Dorothea had been educated in an English family and a Swiss

family at Lausanne, and that their education was ‘narrow and promiscuous’ comprising mainly ‘that toy-box history of the world adapted to young ladies’. So although well-travelled, and despite a reference to ‘school literature’, the Brooke girls may never have attended school in the conventional way Rosamond and Mary did. Autobiographies of the period and novels such as Eric Fenby’s *Little by Little* demonstrate that boys often learnt about sex from other boys. That is likely to have happened with girls as well. When I was a teenager, I used to wonder where Jane Eyre had imbibed her sexual knowledge, such that Rochester’s history was a matter of understanding and no alarm to her. Elizabeth Rigby in her infamous review of *Jane Eyre* wondered the same thing:

[Rochester] pours into her ears disgraceful tales of his past life, connected with the birth of little Adèle, which any man with common respect for a woman, and that a mere girl of eighteen, would have spared her; but which eighteen in this case listens to as if it were nothing new, and certainly nothing distasteful. (*Quarterly Review* December 1848: 164)

As a girl, I thought I spotted a clue. Not only does Bessie sometimes narrate ‘on winter evenings, when she chanced to be in good humour [...] from the pages of *Pamela*’ (Ch. 1), but also Jane went to school with one Mary Ann Wilson who, we are told, reciprocated ‘any racy and pungent gossip [Jane] chose to indulge in’:

Some years older than I, she knew more of the world, and could tell me many things I liked to hear: with her my curiosity found gratification: to my faults also she gave ample indulgence, never imposing curb or rein on anything I said. She had a turn for narrative, I for analysis; she liked to inform, I to question; so we got on swimmingly together, deriving much entertainment, if not much improvement, from our mutual intercourse. (Ch. 9)

I mentioned the *British Medical Journal* earlier. An 1885 *BMJ* article on sexual ignorance, admits that most sexual knowledge passed through chat and reading of an informal nature:

[It passes] through the corrupting medium of lewd jest or obscene print. At the most emotional and plastic period of life, when new instincts are swelling up and causing great mental disquietude, we withhold from boys and girls the knowledge which nature is instinctively trying to impart, and we leave them to grope their way in darkness, or to seek illumination from some unhallowed source.

Why do the young so often regard an obscene work or print with such fearful but irresistible curiosity? Not from mere depravity, as we often assume, but because they are thus unconsciously seeking information which they have a right to possess, and which we are conscientiously bound to supply in some form which will enlighten the reason, without inflaming the imagination and exciting the passions. (15 August: 305)

So the *BMJ* wanted knowledge of sex to be passed on with an official or semi-official sanction. This is of course the premise of Michel Foucault’s famous theory on nineteenth-century sexual knowledge, that sexual discourse was not considered wrong provided it was sanctioned and controlled by the proper institutions, i.e. the Church and medical channels such as the *BMJ*.

The most significant way girls learnt about sex was likely to have been conversation with other women, not just other schoolgirls, but women in their household and circle of friends. In the case of Dorothea and Celia we have to discount relatives, since the sisters’ mother died when they were twelve and they have no near female relatives. Brooke was

blamed by neighbouring families 'for not securing some middle-aged lady as guide and companion to his nieces' (Ch. 1), and the fact that this was prompted by Dorothea's peculiarities in relation to suitors indicates that guidance was thought necessary on the practicalities of marriage. Young married friends would often be the ones who imparted information. In *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth Bennet warns her father about the imprudence of allowing Lydia to stay with Mrs. Forster, 'a very young woman, and very lately married', who has become an instant intimate friend through shared animal high spirits (Ch. 41). One might assume the conversation between the fifteen-year-old Lydia and the very young, very newly-married Mrs Forster would be quite open about marriage and husbands. It is apparent from letters of the period that women talked at length about childbirth, pregnancy and miscarriage. This was often euphemistically rather than anatomically expressed, but euphemism only encouraged rather than discouraged frequent reference. And the older the girl, the more conversation would open up. They would have more married friends who could share their experiences and would be expected to understand the problems of over-fertility, especially among the poor; so Jane Austen wrote to her unmarried niece Fanny about the large family of a Mrs. Deedes, 'I would recommend to her and Mr. D. the simple regimen of separate rooms' (*Letters*, 20 February 1816).

I would speculate that the most important source of information over time for Celia and Dorothea is likely to have been Tantripp, the 'solid-figured woman who had been with the sisters at Lausanne'. There are literary precursors to servants fulfilling this function: one is *Tom Jones* where Honour, maid to the motherless Sophia, contributes conversation forthright enough to fill many gaps. Tantripp, like Honour, is given to 'lively converse'; it is through her gossip that Middlemarch gets to hear about the codicil to Casaubon's will. Tantripp speaks her mind to the girls, 'If anybody was to marry me flattering himself I should wear those hijeous weepers two years for him, he'd be deceived by his own vanity, that's all.' (Ch. 80). Celia chats freely to Tantripp, also to Mrs Cadwallader, which may be why 'the innocent-looking Celia was knowing and worldly-wise' compared to Dorothea. Dorothea scolds Celia for gossiping with Tantripp:

'How can you let Tantripp talk such gossip to you, Celia?' said Dorothea, indignantly [...] 'You must have asked her questions. It is degrading.'

'I see no harm at all in Tantripp's talking to me. It is better to hear what people say. You see what mistakes you make by taking up notions.' (Ch. 4).

Does Celia have Category One knowledge? We don't know, but I think, given the opportunity of finding out, Celia would have been interested, whereas open, ardent, affectionate Dorothea would have thought such details unimportant. As a boy at boarding school, or indeed a girl, Dorothea would have told the tattlers in the dorm to be quiet; Celia likely not.

There is one place in the text which may indicate that Dorothea knew more than we as readers sometimes credit. I would not claim that it is a strong argument, but it is worth consideration. In Casaubon's self-important proposal letter he states:

I can at least offer you an affection hitherto unwasted, and the faithful consecration of a life which, however short in the sequel, has 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)

The proposal letter could be considered a genre in itself, a letter of public record to some extent, and, in the days of court cases for breach of promise to marry, could be considered of some legal effect. A girl would be expected to show it to her parents or guardians, so the suitor had to pitch it carefully. One might suggest that a sexually innocent girl might think Casaubon was referring to bad behaviour generally, e.g. drinking and gambling, but there is never any suggestion that Dorothea does not understand, any more than Gwendolen Harleth does not understand Grandcourt has illegitimate children.

My conclusion in this brief discussion of a complex subject is that we must be wary of placing unauthorial ignorance onto these girls. We do not know what they knew, but there must be a reasonable level of doubt on both sides. Sexual ignorance did exist in the 1830s. There is no doubt of that. But, in the same nest, so did sexual knowledge. There was probably more sexual ignorance among unmarried girls in 1930 than in 1830, when Victorian reticence had not yet taken hold and 1700s openness had not yet died out. And, crucially, it is perfectly possible to be knowledgeable up to a point, even being aware of penetration, without understanding the important part sexual activity plays in marriage. The fact that Dorothea rated attainment of academic knowledge over union with a young sexually able man like Sir James Chettam does not necessarily mean she was ignorant of the physical facts of life. It does illustrate she was unaware that affection and sexual attraction would be important aspects *for her* in marriage. We should not belittle Dorothea's ambitions to marry an eminent man and, through that, to educate herself. Sexual fulfilment need not be the most important aspect of a girl's life, in the nineteenth, the twentieth or the twenty-first centuries. That depends on the girl's priorities.

Had Casaubon been affectionate, lack of a fulfilling sexual life is unlikely to have been a problem for Dorothea. Acton tells one narrative of a wife whose husband did not satisfy her sexually but, apart from lack of children, she was not concerned because of her love for him. (*Functions*: Section entitled 'Absence of Desire or Indisposition for Connection, Sexual Indifference'). The puritanical Dorothea is likely to have taken a similar view. Certainly many nineteenth-century wives seem to have been more concerned with avoiding sex and constant debilitating pregnancies, rather than complaining about too little sex. I would point out that in Trollope's *Barchester Chronicles*, Mrs Bold's two marriages demonstrate the opposite course to Dorothea's: first she marries a young man, then as a widow chooses a forty-year-old scholar. The difference is her second marriage to Francis Arabin is successful, as far as we know, and Arabin epitomised what Dorothea assumed Casaubon to be, an eminent and energetic intellectual. Too few scholars had come Dorothea's way for her to make an informed choice. So, the real problem, I suggest, lies not in Category One, whether Dorothea knew about penetration, nor Category Two, wherever her narrow and promiscuous education abandoned her on the road to knowledge. The problem was Category Three, that Dorothea did not understand her need for affection or that she was capable of great sexual desire. It was Dorothea's lack of self-knowledge, not a simple lack of empirical knowledge about sexual mechanics, that caused her tragedy.

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