Review of The World of Mr Casaubon: Britain's War of Mythography

Colin Kidd

The title of this book is interesting, as the subtitle describes what it is about but the main title refers to a fictional character from *Middlemarch*, part of a novel recently voted the greatest in English. Such a title makes the book much more marketable to a general audience and more likely to be reviewed in some of the broadsheets than a title which indicates that this is a book that ‘venture[s] into the thickets of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antiquarianism’ (vi). But the downside of the more appealing title is that readers who expect *Middlemarch* to play a central role may be disappointed as references to the novel and Mr Casaubon are a small part of a text in which the main focus is on summarising theological arguments and debates that can be found in the large number of books that Professor Kidd has read but few readers will have come across or even heard of. On the other hand the scholarly readership that is Kidd’s most obvious audience may feel Mr Casaubon’s activities, or lack of them, in *Middlemarch*, are something of a distraction in regard to Kidd’s heroic effort to bring to life theological debates which have been virtually edited out of the intellectual history of the west.

Yet for Colin Kidd Eliot’s depiction of Mr Casaubon and his world is an essential element of his study, for it has been crucial to the low esteem in which mythography and theological scholarship in general is held and to the contempt that is habitually directed at those who devoted the lives to studying and writing about it: ‘Casaubon’s name is synonymous with arid pedantry and mindless antiquarianism ... Casaubon represents lethargy, futility and ... that all too familiar deformity found in scholars, the cowardly retreat from engagement with the full-bloodedness of life in the round’ (3-4). For Kidd it ‘was certainly the intention of Eliot’ to depict Mr Casaubon as ‘the exponent of a scholarship that occupies itself with learned shallows but is utterly lacking in depth’ (5). Kidd claims that Eliot’s creation of Mr Casaubon is responsible to a significant extent for the modern view that the ‘study of pagan mythologies’ is an ‘abstruse’ and now irrelevant field which emerged out of ‘a distinctive ecclesiastical category of rural idiocy’ (8). Kidd stresses the irony that Isaac Casaubon whose name Eliot borrowed for her character – ‘the flower of Protestant humanist erudition’ (8) – was ‘far from Casaubonish’ (40): ‘the name we now associate with deluded apologetic futility was borrowed not from a backwoods bigot or dunce, but from a scholar of genius’ (10). Eliot was well aware of Isaac Casaubon’s intellectual achievements but this does not mean there are no connections between him and Eliot’s Casaubon. Kidd seems to have forgotten Mark Pattison’s remarks on Isaac Casaubon in his *Quarterly Review* article of 1853 and his biography of 1875, which almost certainly Eliot had read parts of before publication: ‘Matrimony did not detain him long from his books’; ‘Nature had given him a puny and infirm frame’; ‘Even if Casaubon had found a Boswell, it may be doubted if his talk could have been effectively reported’; ‘excessive labour, joined with anxiety, hastened the end’; ‘Of this monster criticism the volume which we have is only the first half of the first volume – a mere fragment!’; he was ‘destitute of imagination ... It is almost a paradox that this most successful and most thorough interpreter of the classics, should have been a man who was totally destitute of sympathy for their human and naturalistic element’, his books are now ‘consigned to a common oblivion’. Despite all of this Pattison reveres Casaubon as one of the greatest of scholars and his book is an attempt to rehabilitate him and his work; Colin Kidd
is attempting something similar to Pattison by showing that much mythographic study was conducted from a defensible intellectual perspective in which much is at stake and that many of the scholars who devoted their lives to it deserve our respect. Kidd, however, believes that Middlemarch shows that Eliot had no intellectual respect for mythography and subjects those who devoted their lives to it to ridicule. This view is very much open to question.

Though Eliot admired great scholarship, and was a considerable scholar herself, she was well aware of the occupational hazard of scholarship as a vocation since so many major scholars seem to have had severe human inadequacies. As Kidd points out, she ‘had met her fair share of ‘Crypto-Casaubons’ (16). When asked on whom Mr Casaubon was based, however, she famously pointed to herself, calling to mind Flaubert’s supposed remark, ‘Madame Bovary, c’est moi’. Mr Casaubon’s human inadequacies together with his lack of talent in his chosen scholarly pursuit should not be taken to mean, as Kidd suggests, that Eliot regarded the study of mythography as such as futile and pointless, dismissing its legitimacy on sceptical and rational grounds. Why then was she so well read in the subject, well acquainted with the work of some of the major figures, as Kidd shows, such as Warburton or Middleton, if she had no intellectual respect or concern for any of it? Also, his claim that Ladislaw is the spokesman for her views – he calls Eliot ‘his puppeteer’ (132) – as well as arguing that he represents the position of the Higher Criticism in Eliot’s eyes – is, I think, a misreading. Ladislaw is certainly right to see Casaubon’s lack of German as problematic for his project, but as Kidd shows Eliot was well aware that other scholars in the field were familiar with the German dimension. Ladislaw is represented in the novel as an intellectual dilettante; as Naumann points out: ‘His walk must be belles-lettres. That is wi-ide’. He has some knowledge of Mr Casaubon’s mythographic interests but it should not be seen as deep and his dismissal of the whole field is not to be trusted. He also has a motive for undermining Mr Casaubon in Dorothea’s eyes.

Eliot, I suggest, would have been on the side of Kidd, and not Ladislaw, when he writes: ‘Mr Casaubon stood at the end of a distinguished lineage of accommodationist scholarship which since the beginnings of Christianity had tried to reconcile the Christian message with the civilisations of Greece and Rome’ (31). Kidd is right that Eliot does not explicitly mention the vitality of much mythographic writing but that doesn’t mean that she equates all writers on mythography with Casaubon. It would not be surprising if Mr Casaubon’s fellow mythographers at Brasenose – Carp, Tench, and Pike – were as limited as him in human terms but that does not mean they were necessarily as inadequate as him as scholars.

Mr Casaubon is a tragic portrait of the scholar. He has all of the human weaknesses of his great namesake and of other notable scholars, some of whom Eliot knew personally, including Pattison, whom Kidd describes as ‘a donnish curmudgeon’ (16), but no scholarly genius or even talent. Eliot certainly lacked belief in the theological underpinnings of mythography – it’s clear that she found much of it absurd and laughable – but this does not mean that she did not appreciate its cultural importance or value the efforts of those who devoted their lives to it, motivated by the drive to discover some ultimate meaning in human life and the universe. Eliot famously in a letter on Darwinism claimed that ‘explanations of processes by which things came to be, produce a feeble impression compared with the mystery that lies under the processes’. The work of those, such as mythographers, who attempt to penetrate that mystery must be respected even if she may have regarded their
solutions to the mystery as fictions with no ultimate credibility. They testify, however, to the continuing human quest for meaning in life and the universe, even if she thought the mystery will almost certainly never be unravelled. Kidd is mistaken, I think, to believe that for Eliot the phrase ‘key to all mythologies’ is merely to be identified with futility since the novel implies that the existence of such a ‘key’ is an illusion. But this is to ignore the vitality and the intellectual energy and ingenuity that she implies such quests for a ‘key’ can generate, both intellectually and culturally.

One of the merits of Colin Kidd’s book is to show the various forms of that energy and ingenuity in action. Eliot would surely have appreciated Kidd’s demonstration of the sheer extent of writing and argument on the subject, especially his determination to do justice to the many scholars who published books on it. These authors, the great majority now ignored and unread, who almost certainly ‘rest in unvisited tombs’, are resurrected, if only briefly, in Kidd’s discussions of their arguments and their engagement in intellectual debate and controversy. Though their books are accorded serious consideration by him, it remains doubtful whether Kidd will persuade a modern readership to take them seriously any more than Mark Pattison succeeded in arousing interest in the scholarly work of Isaac Casaubon, much of which, claimed Pattison, involved academic ‘drudgery’. Of course, Mr Casaubon is a dangerous figure to invoke. Pattison has been associated with Mr Casaubon ever since the publication of *Middlemarch*, even though I’m inclined to agree with Kidd that the link between her Casaubon and Pattison’s and Pattison himself may have been intended as ‘an intellectual in-joke’ (15) on her part, that he could have been party to. But if it were not for *Middlemarch*’s connecting him with Mr Casaubon, few would now have heard of Pattison. It’s almost certain that Kidd’s study, involving as it must have done years of reading hundreds of books (or more) that most people at the present time would regard as unreadable or irrelevant, is open to being described as ‘Casaubonish’. But I think he has done an intellectual service in undertaking this task, one motivated by the highest scholarly ambition, making the case that ‘Mr Casaubon and his kind mattered. Christian mythographers were involved in an intense struggle for the mind of European civilisation’ (30). Without Mr Casaubon it’s doubtful whether there would be sufficient interest in mythography for such a claim to be given a hearing. This book also has value for students of Eliot, particularly *Middlemarch*, since it testifies to, as Kidd memorably puts it, ‘the unacknowledged iceberg of intellectual history which lurks below the surface of *Middlemarch*’ (199).

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