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'THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS NATURAL BARRENNESS IN NATURAL WOMEN': CHILDLESS MARRIAGES IN *SILAS MARNER* AND THE *LIFTED VEIL.*'

By Marianne Burton

‘There is no such thing as natural barrenness in natural women’ wrote the eminent French psychologist Eugène Becklard in the 1840s, and, in general, physicians agreed with him. Certainly in mid-nineteenth-century literature children were the *sine qua non* of a successful marriage; courtship novels rarely ended at the altar, happy endings demanded babies. Unlike lady novelists who wrote silly novels, George Eliot thought marriage, with its complications, compromises, and lack of easy exits, was quite as interesting as courtship, and childless marriages were generally more interesting than generative ones. The two childless marriages in *Silas Marner* and *The Lifted Veil* present an interesting contrast in Eliot’s treatment of the condition. Nancy Lammeter’s childlessness stands *sui generis* in Eliot’s work as providing one of the plot’s pivots, and for afflicting an otherwise happy marriage, whereas Bertha Grant is an early representative of a series of wives in Eliot’s work, where childlessness is symbolic of a deep-rooted incompatibility between husband and wife.

In *Romola* the narrator opines ‘the little children are still the symbol of the eternal marriage between love and duty’, and in the nineteenth-century novel that is exactly what they represent, a ‘completed’ marriage. Wilkie Collins produced a satirical take on this convention in his essay, ‘A petition to the Novel-Writers’ (*Household Words*, 6 December 1856). A reading group of dull people, who prefer travel books, are discussing a Novel. One gentleman accuses it of glorifying crime when the villain is shot by a handsome highwayman, another criticizes the death-bed scene for being too sad:

But the great effect of the day was produced by a lady, the mother of a large family, which began with a daughter of eighteen years and ended with a boy of eight months. This lady’s objection affected the heroine of the novel – a respectable married woman, perpetually plunged in virtuous suffering, but an improper character for young persons to read about, because the poor thing had two accouchements – only two! – in the course of three volumes. ‘How can I suffer my daughters to read such a book as that?’ cried our prolific subscriber indignantly. A tumult of applause followed. A chorus of speeches succeeded, full of fierce references to ‘our national morality,’ and ‘the purity of our hearths and homes.’ A resolution was passed excluding all novels for the future; and then, at last, the dull people held their tongues, and sat down with a thump in their chairs, and glared contentedly on each other in stolid controversial triumph.

There does not appear to have been any great stigma attached to childlessness in the nineteenth century. Until James Anthony Froude controversially postulated Thomas Carlyle’s impotence in the 1880s, no one seems to have remarked that the Carlyles’ most quintessential and iconic Victorian marriage was childless, and it was a common view that Effie Ruskin should have quietly accepted a childless (and unconsummated) marriage rather than seek divorce. Childlessness does not seem to have excited much comment unless the couple themselves complained of it; indeed, childless couples were considered useful adopters and godparents for families over-blessed with children, as Jane Austen’s brother Edward was adopted by childless relative Thomas Knight. Children were considered, in the main, a matter of Providence where
the middle classes were concerned, and one accepted what was, or was not, given. So in The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton gentle, uncomplaining Milly accepts her large family, in a situation parallel to Eliot’s sister Chrissey (see Barbara Hardy pp. 12-13). And so Nancy Lammeter justifies her objections to adoption:

To adopt a child, because children of your own had been denied you, was to try and choose your lot in spite of Providence: the adopted child, she was convinced, would never turn out well, and would be a curse to those who had wilfully and rebelliously sought what it was clear that, for some high reason, they were better without. (Chap. 17).

Eliot’s novels were no exception to the novelistic convention that successful marriages were fruitful: in Middlemarch Dorothea and Will Ladislaw, and Celia and Sir James Chettham, produce children, and in Daniel Deronda Lady Brackenshaw’s position as lady paramount at the archery contest is marked by her being ‘adorned’, not with jewellery, but ‘two little girls and a boy of stout make’ (Chap. 10). Nevertheless, it is Eliot’s childless couples that present her most interesting physiological studies of marriage. Eliot was of course childless herself, although a loving foster mother to George Henry Lewes’ children, and more than aware of the sensitivities of the issue. For a novelist to present a childless couple, not as secondary characters, but as the novel’s central focus, was not merely to defy genre conventions, it was openly inviting comment upon the ‘workings’ of that marriage. It suggested questions that would be prurient and impertinent in a non-fictional world, in contravention of the nineteenth-century novel’s enforced silence on sexual relations.

It was, in this era and in this genre, daring to write about marriage at all, let alone to refuse your marriage its ‘coming right’ through fecundity.

Examining the good wife before the poisoner, would Becklard have considered Nancy Lammeter a natural woman? As several commentators have noted, the cause of Nancy’s barrenness, and the death of her only child, was possibly venereal infection passed to her by Godfrey, presumably a low level infection – something as simple as chlamydia perhaps – since Godfrey looks no different at the end of the story than at its beginning. He has kept his hair for example, which was a mid-nineteenth-century novelistic clue to health. Margaret Markwick has pointed out how Anthony Trollope’s heroes have firm features and beautiful hair to show they are unsullied by the wasted facial contours and alopecia of secondary syphilis. Similarly Eliot’s Will Ladislaw and Daniel Deronda have dramatic sun-reflecting locks, whereas Henleigh Grandcourt, that ‘washed-out piece of cambric ‘much given to the pursuit of women’, displays an ‘extensive baldness surrounded with a mere fringe of reddish-blond hair’ (Chaps. 36, 30 & 11).

It is worth mentioning the possibility that Godfrey may not have been infected by Molly Farren. Eliot is harsh on the opium- and alcohol-loving Molly, but this does not mean she is necessarily diseased. It is true that she has a ‘love of pink ribbons and gentlemen’s jokes’ which could indicate prior sexual experience, and the phrases ‘poisoned chamber’ and ‘want and degradation’ are even more strongly suggestive. ‘Degradation’ was a word commonly associated with prostitution in the 1860s. Nevertheless it is Molly who produces the healthy child in this story, which raises the possibility that if Godfrey does pass on an infection, he did not contract it from Molly.

Infection or not, by consorting with the lower classes Godfrey has, in mid-nineteenth-century social terms, polluted himself, so the finger of blame must first point at him. Certainly
Priscilla, Nancy’s sister, assigns responsibility to Godfrey’s past: if Nancy had only been ugly, she says, she need not have united herself with ‘folks as have got uneasy blood in their veins’ (Chap. 17). John Reed and Jerry Herron, writing about illegitimacy in Eliot, pointed out the light wording of her sexual references, ‘One must lift the sheet just a little to see the implicit fact that lies beneath’ (p. 185). This is an excellent phrase with which to begin an examination of Nancy, that prim and ‘innicent’ wife, who claims Godfrey is the best of husbands. If we lift the sheet a little, can her childless state also be blamed on Nancy?

The pen picture of Nancy is detailed. From being a small child she has an indomitable will – ‘If you wanted to go the field’s length, the field’s length you’d go’ (Chap. 11) – and as an adult, she insists her sister adopts matching clothes. Once married, she civilizes the unruly Cass household until ‘all is polish, on which no yesterday’s dust is ever allowed to rest’, and keeps ‘a precisely marked place for every article of her personal property’ (Chap. 17). Nancy’s insistence on purity and order goes hand in hand with her rigid notions; one serves and feeds the other. This gives a neat pairing of wives, Molly the slattern against Nancy the compulsive cleaner, and a neat pairing of dysfunctional motherless households, the Cass’s too dirty and masculine, awash with the testosterone of four sons, against the Lammeters’, too neat, too clean, too female.

Along with Nancy’s steely temperament and fastidious personal habits, Eliot gives the reader two significant phrases from which to gauge how she might have responded to her husband physically. The first is that Nancy displays a ‘repugnance to any show of emotion’ (Chap. 11), a trait unusual in Eliot heroines who, if treated affectionately, prefer to lavish on their husbands ‘those childlike caresses which are the bent of every sweet woman, who has begun by showering kisses on the hard pate of her bald doll’ (Middlemarch, Chap. 20). The second phrase is used when Nancy is considering her childlessness and trying to quantify her blame in it, ‘She recalled the small details, the words, tones, and looks, which had called on her for some … forbearance, or of painful adherence to an imagined or real duty’ (Chap. 17). The word ‘duty’ was the most common nineteenth-century euphemism for marital sex, shortened from the phrase ‘marital duties’, and sometimes contrasted with ‘domestic duties’ denoting care of house and children. ‘Marital Duties’ occurs, for example, as a sub-heading for married sex in William Acton’s Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs. Another example is in Jane Austen’s Northanger Abbey: when Henry Tilney suggests dancing and marriage are similar states, Catherine Morland innocently argues the duties must be different, and is gently teased for not understanding the euphemism:

‘In one respect, there certainly is a difference. In marriage, the man is supposed to provide for the support of the woman … That, I suppose, was the difference of duties which struck you, as rendering the conditions incapable of comparison.’

‘No, indeed, I never thought of that.’

‘Then I am quite at a loss.’ (Chap. 10)

The point of this investigation into terminology is to suggest that Eliot’s phrase ‘painful adherence to an imagined or real duty’, in conjunction with other pointers, would alert the attentive reader that Nancy was dutiful rather than affectionate in the marriage bed. This was after all the admired stereotype of wives at this time. Acton wrote:

As a general rule, a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband, but only to please him: and, but for the desire of maternity,
would far rather be relieved from his attentions. (p. 145)

So one answer to the question ‘Was Nancy a natural woman?’ might be not quite natural enough, not as sexually interested as she might have been, despite her love for Godfrey and desire for children. This implied accusation might be added to her more obvious blame in vetoing Eppie’s adoption. One might contend that the narrative is more balanced for blame being shared between the couple, and allows them some hope of a united life following the novel’s close. They are, after all, the one central childless couple in Eliot’s novels who love each other, and perhaps for this reason their narrative is permitted to end without that alternative genre conclusion to childbirth, death.

The question whether Bertha Grant is a natural woman would seem easier to answer, since she is that most unnatural of creatures, a potential husband killer, one of the many beautiful fictional poisoners inspired by Madeline Smith’s celebrated trial in 1857. Bertha is of course not the only woman in Eliot’s narratives who imagines killing husband or lover; both Caterina Sarti in Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story and Gwendolen Harleth in Deronda pick up knives in passion. Even Dorothea Brooke, who is closer to the Nancy Lammeter good wife stereotype, seems to fantasize about her husband’s death in a mild form. Returning to Lowick after her three month honeymoon Dorothea studies the miniature of Will’s grandmother and, contemplating the disappointment of her own marriage, feels a new companionship with the sitter. As she looks at the portrait Dorothea has a vivid silent fantasy of Will being in love with her:

The vivid presentation came like a pleasant glow to Dorothea; she felt herself smiling, and turning from the miniature sat down and looked up as if she were again talking to a figure in front of her. But the smile disappeared as she went on meditating, and at last she said aloud –

‘Oh, it was cruel to speak so! How sad – how dreadful!’

She rose quickly and went out of the room, hurrying along the corridor, with the irresistible impulse to go and see her husband and inquire if she could do anything for him. (Chap. 28)

The suggestion seems to be that Dorothea’s conscience is stricken by the ramifications of a new bride fantasying about another man. Such fantasies must either be adulterous, a concept alien to Dorothea’s sense of morality, or involve the death of her husband. In the final volume, when Dorothea says to Rosamond that preferring another man to one’s husband ‘murders our marriage – and then the marriage stays with us like a murder’ (Chap. 81), this is not simply strong imagery, it is acknowledging that fantasies about illicit love for a mid-nineteenth-century wife must either be fantasies about adultery, or death. There existed no other realistic option.

It is true that Eliot’s novels emphasize that fantasies about murder, still less providential death, are not murder itself, even when the knife has been picked up, or the arsenic purchased. Maynard Gilfil comforts Caterina:

we mean to do wicked things that we never could do, just as we mean to do good or clever things that we never could do. Our thoughts are often worse than we are, just as they are often better than we are. And God sees us as we are altogether, not in separate
feelings or actions, as our fellow-men see us. (Chap. 19)

Good people who would never commit a murder, fantasize about the death of people who make their life difficult. No doubt Marion Evans herself fantasized about the death of Agnes, Lewes’s wife. Eliot implicates the reader in this wish for killing: she stirs up considerable readerly satisfaction when the mistreated wives in Janet’s Repentence and Romola are providentially freed by their husband’s deaths. Bertha is a more shadowy and enigmatic figure than Janet and Romola, and Latimer is a more shadowy husband than theirs, for all the detail of his first person narrative. In Bertha’s marriage there are no obvious grounds for hatred on either side – no drunken beatings or families sired on other women – just simple repulsion, husband for wife, wife for husband. Latimer reports that he despises Bertha for the blank prosaic wall of her mind, but that raises the question why Bertha hates Latimer so much.

If large families placed a strain on many nineteenth-century marriages, such as the Bartons’, then the absence of children placed an opposite but commensurate strain, especially on the woman. A wealthy 1850-70s wife suffered from what Eliot calls ‘the gentlewoman’s oppressive liberty’ (Middlemarch, Chap. 28), and, without children, there was little licit outlet for her affection or interest except her husband. Becklard wrote, ‘The uterus may be said to govern the woman … reproduction of the species is, in her, the most important object in life’ (p. 112); other physiologists agreed it was a woman’s ‘right’ to expect children, and a husband’s duty to ensure that expectation was fulfilled. An article on sexual disorders in The Lancet, August 1870, warns men not to marry if there is a chance they will not be able to satisfy their wives sexually: ‘It is subjecting the health, the happiness, and even the virtue of a woman to risks that she ought not to incur’. The article opines that if a woman were not sexually satisfied and given children, she would be likely to seek, and, the implication is, justified in seeking, satisfaction elsewhere:

... it would be hardly possible to inflict upon a bride a greater physical evil than a marriage which should awaken her own sexual desires, and then utterly fail to satisfy them. The men who are the subjects of sexual weakness are, as a rule, inexpressibly nasty; and are not calculated to strengthen a woman under such adverse circumstances, or to improve the moral tendencies of her character. In many instances nature will secure the wife against uterine disease by arming her with a loathing for her husband which renders it impossible for him to excite in her anything except disgust; and then it is not unusual for her to solace herself with other men, or to desert her home for some more capable companion. (pp. 224-25)

The Lancet article would seem to support the view expressed in Deronda, that ‘the suspicion that a wife is not happy, naturally leads one to speculate on the husband’s private deportment’ (Chap. 35), and there are two phrases in The Lifted Veil which seem to invite speculation, to lift the sheet a little, on this couple’s intimate life. Latimer writes that when first married he experienced ‘that sort of intoxicated callousness which came from the delights of a first passion’ (Chap. 2). In the same paragraph he complains that their initial busy social life left time for only ‘hastily-snatched caresses’. A combination of intoxicated callousness and hastily-snatched caresses sounds as if initial sexual activity was satisfactory for Latimer but possibly insensitive towards Bertha. Callousness cannot have endeared a husband to an inexperienced Victorian bride.

W. R. Greg wrote an article on ‘Prostitution’ in the Westminster Review of July 1850,
a few months before John Chapman took over proprietorship and effectively gave the
editorship to Marian Evans, so one may assume it was an article she had read. It is interesting
not merely for its comments on prostitution, but also for its outspoken comments on marriage,
drawing for example explicit parallels between prostitutes and women who marry for money.
Greg maintains, not unreasonably for the era, that both unmarried and married women felt
sullied by their ‘first sacrifice at the shrine of love’:

The married woman feels shame, often even remorse, and strange confusion of all her
previous moral conceptions. As a most virtuous and sensible lady once said, ‘It is not a
quarter-of-an-hour’s ceremony in a church that can make that welcome or tolerable to
pure and delicate feelings, which would otherwise outrage their whole previous notions,
and their whole natural and moral sense.’ (p. 473)

From the incident where Bertha hangs Latimer’s gift of a ring between her breasts, it may be
surmised that she is sensual by nature. However Bertha, and indeed Gwendolen and Dorothea,
most correctly for young ladies of this period, are not sexually alert before marriage, they do
not understand the significance of erotics. Bertha wants to be contemptuous of her husband: to
love him, she thinks, that must be the ‘most unpleasant thing in the world’ (Chap. 2), and
Dorothea thinks ‘the really delightful marriage must be … where your husband was a sort of
father, and could teach you … Hebrew’ (Chap. 1). Gwendolen has ‘about as accurate a
conception of marriage – that is to say, of the mutual influences, demands, duties of man and
woman in the state of matrimony – as she had of magnetic currents and the law of storms’
(Chap. 27). Whatever knowledge they have of their marital duties beforehand, these woman are
not sexually awakened until after marriage, when one may surmise they reflect that, with this
deeper knowledge, they would have made a profoundly different choice.

Why does Bertha have no children? Diane Mason has suggested that Latimer
demonstrates the traits of a masturbator who has wasted his powers, as depicted in
contemporary tracts warning against the practice. That is one possibility. He might equally
suffer from a number of nameable defects, or, as seems probable, simple lack of empathy, both
sexual and emotional. The important point is he cannot satisfy Bertha in any way, sexually, or
by providing her with children, or even by education. He never tries to make his love-making
more acceptable to her, or attempts to improve the mind he judges to be vain and vacuous. He
is the one person in Eliot’s works who can hear the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, but
he never tries to use it for good, as Eliot’s later added epigraph to the story laments.

The absence of children in a Victorian novel is not a silence, it is a question mark. It
invites discussion. Is it a choice, as it was apparently for Eliot and Lewes? Or a sign of physical
incapacity? Does it point to sexual disease? Or to a distaste for sex? If one were to formulate
a general rule for Eliot’s childless couples, one might say that after Amos Barton, Eliot found
it difficult to write a good or strong woman being made pregnant by a weaker man, whether
emotionally or morally weaker. Janet, Romola, and Dorothea, all finally obtain children, as
Eliot did herself through Lewes’ family, but only after their weak husbands have been erased
from their narratives. Even the conclusion of Deronda seems open to the possibility that
Gwendolen and Rex might marry. For Bertha however, there are no clues as to whether she
found love or children after Latimer’s death, which would have been for her as providential as
the deaths of Casaubon and Grandcourt were for their wives. She is the one figure in Eliot’s
work whose mind is read within the story and yet we know almost nothing about her post-
marriage, except that she is unhappy to the point of murder and is childless.

While Nancy Lammeter remains firmly confined within her narrative, Bertha spills outside hers as a forerunner of later Eliot heroines. A plausible argument can be made that Gwendolen Harleth is a conscious re-writing of Bertha. The appearance of the two girls is strikingly similar: one is described as a sylph, the other as a water nixie; both dress consistently in green and white; one has a Lamia beauty, the other wears a snake brooch. Gwendolen even has her mind read by her husband, ‘What I care to know I shall know without your telling me’ Grandcourt says (Chap. 36), although in this book it is Gwendolen not Grandcourt who has presentiments of disaster. When George Eliot wrote to John Blackwood on 28 February 1873 that it would be injudicious to reprint The Lifted Veil at that time, it may have been that she was consciously planning a re-appraisal of Bertha, the childless wife who wishes to kill her husband, this time from the wife’s viewpoint. Certainly the early ideas for Deronda were formulated in her mind as early as September 1872, when Eliot witnessed Byron’s grandniece lose at roulette. Once the initial volumes of Deronda had been published and Gwendolen had made her mark on a fascinated audience, Eliot may have felt safe from detection and granted permission for The Lifted Veil to be quietly re-printed as a minor work.

Although Eliot’s works emphasize the importance of children in a woman’s life, whether biological or adopted, few of her heroines, good women or lesser women, could be said to be ‘governed by their uterus’; their main desire is for understanding and love. Nancy’s childless sorrow is tempered by Godfrey’s affection and respect; Bertha, Eliot’s dark Gwendolen, is never offered this option. According to Eliot’s novelistic conventions there is nothing unnatural in a woman being childless, particularly if she is superior to her husband, and nothing unnatural in a married woman contemplating release through the death of an unsatisfactory husband. Gwendolen confesses, Bertha is betrayed, Dorothea keeps her secret locked within her heart, until it leaks out in her speech to Rosamond. Childlessness, in Eliot as in life, may not be natural, but it is common. And so perhaps are dreams of murder in the hearts of unhappy women.

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