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## A Response- 2014

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## A RESPONSE

by Barbara Hardy

Against Marianne Burton's carefully argued case for the consummation of the Casaubon marriage are images and hints which I mentioned in *The Appropriate Form: an Essay on the Novel*<sup>1</sup> and *Particularities: Readings in George Eliot*,<sup>2</sup> especially: the Cadwallader and Chettam opinions: 'A great bladder for dried peas to rattle in, and 'no good red blood'; the onanistic echo of 'the seeds of joy are for ever wasted', (*Middlemarch*, ch. 42); Casaubon's lack of bliss; post-marital absence of expectations of issue; 'the way' in which 'years to come' ... might be filled with joyful devotedness' became less clear for Dorothea after marriage (*M*, ch. 20); her idea of changing the will which left 'the bulk of his property to her, with proviso in case of her having children'; (*M*, ch. 37); the narrator's dry observation that unlike early sonneteers, no one required Casaubon to leave a copy of himself (*M*, ch. 29); and Dorothea's longing 'for objects who could be dear to her, and to whom she could be dear' (*M*, ch. 48): all of which should be read in context.

I find two aspects of Burton's pro-consummation case unconvincing and redundant: 'If Eliot's intention were that Dorothea married Ladislav 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 ...' 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'.

However, Burton's close reading persuades me, by one quotation, that I paid too little attention to Casaubon's private responses after marriage:

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) (*My italics*)

The phrases 'acting with propriety' and 'fulfilling all outward requirements' are ambiguous, possibly suggestive of a lack of internal 'requirements', and odd coming straight after '*acquitting*', but Casaubon would be unlikely to feel 'the sense of *acquitting* himself' in this context of 'domesticity' had he failed to perform, however briefly, untenderly and unpassionately, in the marriage bed. I contemplate the remote possibility that, like Bulstrode's prayers, which we are told may not be candid, Casaubon's inhibition and pride go too deep even for this brilliant free indirect style, but in the end I find the word '*acquitted*', in spite of a lexical ambiguity, a stumbling-block .

What also interests me in looking back over this long-lasting discussion is the absence of any argument comparable to that in Shakespeare criticism, famously exemplified by L. C. Knights's revised and much examined, 'How Many Children had Lady Macbeth?'<sup>3</sup> Logically, the novel is no more invulnerable to biographical speculation than the theatre, but in novel-criticism, especially pre-modernist analysis, we are all Bradleys, as we pay tribute to George Eliot's psychological realism, and also to her sexual, authorial and dramatic reticence. She makes it clear that no one, including the reader who accepts the case that the marriage is

consummated, will ever know what Dorothea thought of a wedding-journey to Rome, and this dark joke is moving, strongly guarding Dorothea's reserve, and Casaubon's – but is it not fascinating that apparently no one entertains the possibility that George Eliot left the issue undecided, as a fiction-writer can and may?

#### Notes

- 1 Athlone 1964.
- 2 Peter Owen 1962.
- 3 see *Explorations*: Chatto and Windus 1958.