Title: Edward Casaubon: A Multidimensional Antagonist in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*

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Edward Casaubon: A Multidimensional Antagonist in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*

The character of Edward Casaubon in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* is pitiable yet powerfully effective. He accomplishes little and dies early yet is a widely versatile antagonist. I will argue that the character of Edward Casaubon is a vital implement for assessing social issues current during the temporal setting of the novel and at its date of publication. George Eliot employs the character of Edward Casaubon to address a variety of public concerns including, agricultural and social reform, the progressive and mutable Catholic Question, and the complex debate between science and religion. While Dorothea Brooke is compared to Saint Teresa of Avila, Casaubon emerges as the Saint’s antithesis. Displayed alongside Dorothea’s passion, Edward’s encumbering disregard presents itself as a potent barrier to all forms of social progress.

Eliot’s forward to *Middlemarch* describes the other Saint Teresas whose “loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness” (XXXV). Dorothea is among the unvenerated St. Teresas responsible “for the growing good of the world” (1:364). Saint Teresa of Avila’s sixteenth-century work, *The Interior Castle*, was a catalyst to mystical spiritualism that opposed Spain’s counter-reforming inquisition and has remained a quintessential spiritual text (XV). George Eliot juxtaposes the architectural essence of this work and creates the character of Edward Casaubon. In *The Interior Castle*, St. Teresa envisions the structure of one’s inner being and the passionate journey that culminates in a glorious spiritual union: “there are many rooms in this castle, of which some are above, some below, others at the side, in the centre, in the very midst of them all, is the principal chamber in which God and the soul hold their most secret intercourse” (4). Edward Casaubon is the antithesis of St. Teresa’s conception. “Mr. Casaubon’s immediate desire was not for divine communion” (Eliot 1:371); Edward “was the centre of his own world” (1:71). He is described as wondering through candle lit vaults (1:71), “lost among
small closets and winding stairs" (1:174). When Dorothea first meets Casaubon she imagines his mind along with his work to be of "attractive labyrinthine extent" (1:16), but then later sees his mind as "anterooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowither" and his achievements as nothing more than "a lifeless embalmment of knowledge" (1:172,173).

Edward Casaubon is a rector with the potential of being widely influential. He is among the upper classes; aside from the living of Lowick Parish "the death of his brother put him in possession of the manor" (Eliot 1:60). He has also achieved some notoriety; Mrs. Cadwallader calls him "our Lowick Cicero" (1:42), and Brooke claims that "he is pretty certain to be a Bishop" (1:54). But his prominence is ineffectual. The opening chapters of *Middlemarch* show the Reverend Edward Casaubon passively ignoring a variety of human concerns on threshold of reform as the story of *Middlemarch* unfolds. It's important to note that these same issues are still current while Eliot is writing the novel and each achieve further resolve in the decade of the novel's publication. Michael Mason's essay "Middlemarch in History" connects the issues addressed in *Middlemarch* to two pivotal points in time, the passing of first Reform Bill of 1832 that corresponds with the temporal setting of the novel, and the second Reform Bill of 1867, passed four years prior to the book's publication. (418). Eliot’s choice of Edward’s profession is profound. It associates him with devout men who championed the causes addressed in the early chapters of *Middlemarch*.

Casaubon’s first appearance is at the home of Arthur Brooks where James Chettam is discussing agricultural reform by "setting a good pattern of farming among my tenants" (Eliot 1:10). This subject was a growing means of tension between land owners and tenants in the early 1800s. Julian McQuistion’s article, "Agricultural History" tells how in 1846 tenant farmers found an effective advocate in Phillip Pusey, editor of the Royal Agricultural Society’s journal,
representative in parliament, writer of hymns, and brother of Edward Pusey who founded the religious movement, Puseyism. Phillip Pusey proposed a bill that would facilitate increased farm production through the incorporation of advanced technology as well as tenant reimbursement for land and structural improvements. A form of this bill was finally approved in 1875 (96-99).

The "machine-breaking and rick-burning" Arthur Brooke speaks of (Eliot 1:18) peaked in 1842 and carried the threat of revolution. The Luddites, for example, were a group comprised of laborers in the textile industry whose jobs were taken over by modern machinery. From 1811 through 1816 they protested the loss of their livelihoods with violent rioting in the textile districts (Bloy, "Luddites"). Other working class groups followed suit. One of their spokesmen was the Quaker minister John Bright who fought to repeal the Corn Laws; he also sought reform on behalf of mill and factory workers. His efforts helped to bring about the second Reform Act of 1867 (Bloy John Bright). Eliot knew the Reverend John Bright and his brother, Jacob; they were all members of the social group that gathered at the home of Charles and Cara Bray (Karl 73). Jacob Bright, a devout Quaker, proposed the first bill for women's suffrage in 1870, followed by the Women's Disabilities Removal bill in 1873. He was an active member of the Married Women's Property Committee and fought diligently for women's causes until his death in 1899 (Crawford 79). In Middlemarch Dorothea is shamed by her uncle's chauvinistic claims that "young ladies are too flighty" (1:13) and "young ladies don't understand political economy" as Casaubon sits quietly by with his mind engaged elsewhere (1:10).

Brooke also talks of emancipation (Eliot 1:316) and of the Reverend William Wilberforce who achieved reform through the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 (Bloy "Anti-Slavery"). It is Wilberforce's aim of more humane criminal laws that Brooke takes up when defending the sheep thief who is sentenced to hang when Casaubon neglects to help in his defense (Eliot1:30) and it
is Wilberforce’s philanthropic actions that Arthur Brooke wishes to emulate if he is elected to Parliament. (Eliot 1:13). Brooke boasts, “I knew Wilberforce in his best days … Do you know Wilberforce?” “No” is Casaubon’s reply (Eliot 1:12). Each issue that Casaubon dismisses eventually brings notoriety to a member of the clergy or one with close clerical ties. Edward’s desire for prestige leads him to focus his attention solely on his work, *Key to all Mythologies*, which offers him the “opportunity for gratifying his vanity” (174). While Brooke talks of reform, Casaubon is “thinking of the book only” (1:10); ironically, it is a labor that “would never see the light” (Eliot 1:43).

Reform issues resurfaced throughout Eliot’s life. Michael Mason’s article stresses that the two Reform Bills are like book ends that demarcate a series of related events. The reader must not only consider the “simultaneous dimension” of the novel but also regard the second Reform Bill “as a culmination rather than a resurgence of tendencies initiated in the early thirties” (Mason 419,420). To cover this progression, Eliot designs a multi-applicable antagonist. She embodies Casaubon with traits that facilitate his use as stand-in for the opposition of more than one issue and in more than one time period. In addressing the Catholic Question Eliot gives Casaubon Catholic traits that add legitimacy to the issue’s relevancy. Dorothea compares Casaubon to St. Augustine (Eliot 1:17) and, metaphorically, kisses his feet “as if he were a Protestant Pope” (1:40). Not only does Casaubon write pamphlets on the Catholic Question, he takes Dorothea to Rome because he “wishes to inspect some manuscripts in the Vatican” (1:73).

Eliot employs Casaubon’s association with Catholicism to address various mutations of the Catholic question over time. His writings tie him to specific religious and scientific movements such as Tractarianism started by John Henry Newman a few years after the Roman Catholic Relief act of 1829. The movement was named for its prolific distribution of tracts; its
goal was to reunite the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches (Schlossber). In Middlemarch Casaubon is the author of tracts on “The Catholic Question” (1:54), and “The Early Church” (1:28), and Mrs. Cadwallader suspects that Brooke and Casaubon are “going to bribe the voters with pamphlets” (1:42). Dorothea compares him with Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet who tried to convert Huguenots to Catholicism (1:17).

Casaubon can also be associated with the ensuing Ritualist Movement aimed at incorporating Catholic rituals and symbolism into the Anglican service (McClintock). Key to all Mythologies and Casaubon’s tract on “Egyptian Mysteries” suggest ancient symbols and ritualism (1:325). His life is lived out in a ritualistic manor, so much so that long after his death his horses charge home; they are used to “Casaubon being unenjoying and impatient in everything away from his desk and wanting to get to the end of all journeys” (Eliot 1:185). In Rome he poses as St. Thomas Aquinas for a painting that Arthur Brooke describes by saying, “Everything is symbolical … but you are quite at home in it” (1:290). Casaubon’s ritualistic methods and the nature of Key to all Mythologies as well as his tract on “Biblical Cosmology” (1:13) connect him with one of the most complex and heated debates of the century.

Casaubon’s character fits within the chronologically expanding fault line that became the great schism between science and religion. To convey this multifarious conflict Eliot applies Roman scholar Marcus Terentius Varro’s concept of a theological trinity to three characters facing distinct aspects of the debate. Varro claimed “there are three kinds of theology, of these, the one is called mythical, the other physical, and the third civil” (Augustine 238). St. Augustine develops this theory further in his work City of God. Both authors are mentioned in Eliot’s Middlemarch notebooks (Neufeldt 34, 236). In the story, Farebrother, who is “very fond of Natural History and various scientific matters” (2:59), represents physical theology or what St.
Augustine termed “natural theology” (Augustine 239). Casaubon, who aims to prove that “all the mythical fragments in the world were corruptions of a tradition originally revealed” (Eliot 1:16), characterizes mythical theology. Tertius Lydgate, whose medical practice is impeded by the pious and politically empowered Bulstrode, signifies civil theology. Lydgate’s first name points to the connection between *Middlemarch* and Varro’s theological triad. St. Augustine lists civil as the third theology (Augustine 238); the Latin word for third is Tertius. Also, Varro, like Lydgate, was intimidated by politicians. St Augustine exclaims, “O Marcus Varro ... you fear to offend those most corrupt opinions of the populace” (240). Lydgate, characteristically similar to Varro, is given a contraction of his middle name “Terentius.

As Eliot wrote *Middlemarch* three discrete skirmishes were being waged between the scientific and religious communities. By using Marcus Varro’s construct of the three theologies Eliot is able to sort out and represent the varied and complicated aspects of the dispute. One battle is against the parson-naturalist that, according to Frank Turner’s article, “The Victorian Conflict between Science and Religion,” made up a large portion of the scientific community in the early 1800s. Thomas Huxley became a spokesman for professional scientists proclaiming that “clerical scientists stood accused of dual loyalties” (qtd. in Turner 365); Huxley states “no one should imagine that he is, or can be, both a true son of the Church and a loyal soldier of science” (qtd. 370). The Reverend Farebrother is an avocational entomologist; his study contains ample specimens of insects, flora, and fossils, and “his bookcase is filled with expensive illustrated books on Natural History” (1:151). He senses conflict between his profession and scientific interests. Lydgate says that “Farebrother often hints that he has got into the wrong profession ... he is hampered in reconciling these tastes with his position” (2:59). While Eliot
wrote the novel, professional scientists determined to "exorcise from their ranks clergymen scientists who regarded the study of physical nature as serving natural theology" (364).

Lydgate, who strives to modernize medical practices in Middlemarch, is pitted against Bulstrode who is "wanting to play bishop and banker everywhere" (Eliot 1:112). Dogmatic politicians posed another predicament for professional scientists. Frank Turner explains that two of the primary facilitators of British science were the aristocratic benefactors and the "clerically dominated universities and secondary schools" (360). These groups "controlled access to much scientific patronage and employment. ... Areas of inquiry, methods of research, and conclusions were discouraged or proscribed because they carried the implication of impiety, immorality, or blasphemy" (361). Lydgate speaks freely about what he sees as obvious flaws in Middlemarch’s backward medical practices like the one that requires physicians to receive payment through prescriptions (Eliot 2:13). But his reluctance to stand up to Bulstrode leads to an alliance that soon becomes a "blight on his honorable ambition" (2:276).

While civil theology interferes with reform, mythical theology dismisses reform as a distraction from a piously fabricated focus. As civil unrest is stirring up England’s soil Casaubon sits in the eye of the storm with blinders preventing any interference from distracting his focus on *Key to all Mythologies*. Arthur Brooke makes the comment, "when a man has great studies and is writing a great work he must of course give up seeing much of the world" (Eliot 1:30). Aside from shutting out important, current matters, Casaubon’s misuse of scientific method demonstrates yet another conflict between scientists and the clergy. He employs partiality in his research by omitting all texts that are contrary to his hypotheses; "the difficulty of making his Key to all Mythologies unimpeachable weighed like lead upon his mind" (Eliot 1:246). Casaubon suffers with indigestion from "the rivalry of dialectical phrases ringing against
each other in his brain” (1:247). In David Carroll’s essay “The Externality of Fact.” Carroll explains that “Casaubon’s research for Key to all Mythologies shows the intellect refusing to modify a hypothesis and so turning it into a deduction which determines its findings beforehand” (78). Carroll claims that a “hypothesis resisting contrary evidence, is for George Eliot the epitome of stupidity and pride” (78).

Eliot was a part of the scientific community. In 1862 she and Lewes joined an exclusive Scientific/Philosophic club (Haight 276); its members included Huxley and others who would later spearhead the Education Act of 1870 that dissolved some of the Church’s control on education (Turner 374). Among Huxley’s pet peeves were “persons who employed or seemed to employ science for ecclesiastical ends”(Turner 369). He claimed that Roman Catholic Church “carefully calculated for the destruction of all that is highest in the moral nature, in the intellectual freedom, and in the political freedom of mankind." (371). Eliot read Huxley’s work while she prepared to write Middlemarch (Neufeldt 62, 146) and Huxley visits Eliot in her home on at least three occasions prior to her writing the novel (Harris 106, 125,127).

Eliot was personally opposed to generalizations that gather diverse humanity under one defining caption. In Karl’s biography of Eliot he states “Her mockery of Casaubon’s effort to write Key to all Mythologies ... was also a scornful view of any kind of overall design which tried to explain human behavior” (493). Eliot believed that works of this ilk were “a betrayal of human experience” (Karl 493). Combining her own views with those of Huxley, Eliot sketches out the Catholic tinted Casaubon, her mythological theologian, cloistered in his Lowick hermitage, convoluting scientific method to incorporate his vast collection of creation stories into a universal Genesis.
In *A Natural History of German Life* Eliot explains the term Philister as the personification of the spirit which judges everything from a lower point of view than the subject demands" (Eliot 174). Casaubon is the epitome of a Philister, he is “indifferent to all social interests, all public life ... he has no sympathy with political and social events except as they affect his own comfort and prosperity” (174). In *Middlemarch* Casaubon spends his days anguishing over the unassembled leafs of his vapid opus. He relinquishes all civil responsibility to the “inferior clergy” such as his curate, Mr. Tucker, who was better informed about “the villagers and other parishioners” (1:64). Eliot holds Casaubon up as an exemplar of apathetic impotence; his “years full of knowledge seem to have issued in a blank absence of interest or sympathy” (1:174). He is cleverly partnered with Dorothea, who yearns for a life “filled with action at once rational and ardent” (1:73). She first sees Edward as “a modern Augustine who united the glories of doctor and saint” (1:17), but his willing ignorance and virulent indifference toward vital matters and members of his community reveal his resolve to separate his learned intellect from the contaminating influence of any saintly act.

Eliot’s intricate structuring of Edward Casaubon had an immediate pay off. *Middlemarch* was a success from its initial publication. In her diary Eliot writes of “people exalting it above everything else I have written,” and that “no former book of mine has been received with more enthusiasm” (Harris142). And over every other character, Casaubon is the one under everyone’s skin. Karl explains that there were “attempts to indentify various characters, with the search for Casaubon being the most intense” (512). Harriet Beecher Stowe claims that it was George Lewes and receives an insistent denial from Eliot (Karl 494). Gordon Haight believes he is based on DR. R. H. Brabant who was forever attempting to write an epic work. Other models for Casaubon are Mark Pattison, the rector of Lincoln College, Oxford, Robert William Mackay, a
friend of Eliot who remained a bachelor until age forty eight, and even Herbert Spencer who was penning his own voluminous set of tomes (Karl 458). Eliot claims that parts of Casaubon are based on herself, she tells Harriet Beecher Stowe “I fear that the Casaubon-tints are not quite foreign to my own mental complexion. At any rate I am very sorry for him” (Karl 494).

Edward Casaubon is indeed pitiable. He has a vast knowledge of antiquities but no awareness of the needs within his own parish. He yearns for admiration yet continually chooses isolation. He shows no empathy toward his fellows struggling in destitute living conditions nor compassion for of his wife who is forced to bury her own ambitions to trudge in the wake of his. He is a scholar whose ears are attuned to the dead, who deflects scientific progress with a conjured smoke screen. He has the means of offering succor but is incapable of extending sympathy. His life’s effort amounts to a meaningless mass of unfinished work. But, as a character, Edward Casaubon is structural masterpiece and through him Eliot effectively displays humanity’s most obstinate and prevailing impediments to social progress. He is portrayed as impotent yet Edward Casaubon penetrates the readers of *Middlemarch* exposing character traits that halt or forestall growth. Out of this seemingly feeble character emerges a potently versatile and timeless adversary to reform.
Work Cited


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