

CHAPTER I

Prologue: Casaubon's Dubious Bequest

My mind is something like the ghost of an ancient, wandering about the world and trying mentally to construct it as it used to be. (*Middlemarch*, ch. 2)

George E was not quite 'goddess' – or was 'goddess' with a flaw. (F. W. Maitland to Henry Jackson, 25 February 1904, in C. H. S. Fifoot [ed.], *The Letters of Frederic William Maitland* [Selden Society, 1965], p. 296)

Unusually, perhaps, this work of history takes as its point of departure a fictional character: Mr Casaubon, the bookish and unworldly clergyman who plays a central role in the plot of George Eliot's novel Middlemarch (1871–2). Postmodern playfulness, however, stops here. What follows is anchored in the realm of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectual life, and tries to describe the contours and content of the once-lively genre of religious apologetics to which the Reverend Edward Casaubon aspired to contribute. The title of Casaubon's unfinished manuscript is 'The Key to All Mythologies', which is also used as shorthand here for the field in which Casaubon operates. It is very important to stress at the outset that the primary emphasis of this book does not fall upon the various influences which directly shaped Eliot's portrayal of Casaubon and his activities as a mythographer – or, as often as not, his sluggish and misdirected inactivity. Rather this study anatomises Casaubon's hobby horse. It attempts to recover the discipline and strategies of the 'science' of mythography - not only what can be traced to Eliot's known reading or assumed reasonably to be part of her wider general knowledge (dauntingly extensive as these were), but also what lay far beyond. Eliot's sources, inspiration and literary art are, naturally enough, integral to the story, but they do not constitute this book's marrow.

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¹ See, in the context of *Middlemarch*, J. C. Pratt and V. A. Neufeldt (eds.), *George Eliot's Middlemarch notebooks* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1979), esp. 'Appendix: a check list of George Eliot's reading Jan. 1868 to Dec. 1871', pp. 279–88; A. Fleishman, *George Eliot's intellectual life* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 164–5.



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The desire to find an original of Mr Casaubon has turned into one of the more enjoyable, if recherché, snark-hunts in modern literary scholarship.2 Such was the range of Eliot's reading, and such the fertility of her imagination, that Mr Casaubon lives in fiction as himself, not as a mere cipher for a scholar of whom Eliot had made the acquaintance in real life - that is, as Mary Ann or Marian Evans, for whom 'George Eliot' was a pseudonym – or on the page. Although the study which follows comprehends a good number of learned antiquarians, who will sometimes be painted in Casaubonish colours, our primary object is to reconstruct the vanished world of the old mythographers, a group which sought in mythology a set of unlikely answers to some of the most pressing problems of both the age of Enlightenment and the crisis of faith. Might the earliest secrets of humankind's history be found in the mythologies of pagan peoples? Might pagan mythology provide corroboration from an unexpected quarter for the threatened truths of Christianity? From the eighteenth century these questions informed ideological struggles between defenders of the Church and its radical infidel critics, and would leave an imprint on the new nineteenth-century sciences of philology and anthropology. Much more was at stake, it transpires, in the quest for a 'key to all mythologies' than Eliot, who was aware of these debates, reveals to the readers of Middlemarch.

Our real subject matter is these lost wars of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century mythography, which are alluded to – fleetingly and obliquely – in *Middlemarch*. Posterity is peripherally aware of these conflicts, but largely by way of Mr Casaubon's sad, at best semi-scholarly, failure; which means that nineteenth-century mythography stands representative of abject antiquarian pointlessness. To be fair, there is considerable truth in this received idea. Mr Casaubon was not on a high road to major intellectual breakthroughs. Nevertheless, the vast hinterland behind the mythographical debates mentioned in *Middlemarch* is a more significant and variegated terrain than Eliot – a freethinking convert from Christianity – lets on. Ironically, indeed, as we shall see, the backstory of Casaubonish mythography diverges dramatically from the sterile, unworldly disengagement of which Mr Casaubon has for so long been an emblem.

² See e.g. J. Sparrow, Mark Pattison and the idea of a university (Cambridge, 1967), ch. 1; R. Ellmann, 'Dorothea's husbands', Times Literary Supplement (16 February 1973); A. D. Nuttall, Dead from the waist down: scholars and scholarship in literature and the popular imagination (New Haven, 2003), pp. 72–83; H. S. Jones, Intellect and character in Victorian England: Mark Pattison and the invention of the don (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 81–4; R. Ashton, 'Lunch with the Rector: George Eliot and Mark Pattison revisited', Times Literary Supplement (31 January 2014).



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Mr Casaubon has, of course, become a byword for erudite futility.³ Within the plot of *Middlemarch*, which is set around 1830–2, the Reverend Edward Casaubon, who is tucked away for much of the novel in the study of his obscure rectory in the village of Lowick somewhere in the Midlands, is engaged on his fruitless scholarly enterprise, 'The Key to All Mythologies'. In this quixotic work of syncretism Mr Casaubon hopes to find an intellectual system for reconciling the diverse richness of the world's pagan beliefs and legends with an aboriginal Old Testament religion of which all forms of heathenism are in their different ways corruptions. Mr Casaubon's unfinished, perhaps unfinishable, *magnum opus* turns out to be something of an albatross for the enervated antiquarian. Not only is Casaubon's task over-ambitious and misconceived, but he is also out of touch with recent paradigm-shifting developments in German mythography and Biblical criticism which render his work old-fashioned and an anachronism in its own time.

It transpires that Mr Casaubon's life-enhancing young cousin, the cosmopolitan Will Ladislaw, is aware of these new advances in early nineteenth-century German intellectual life, notwithstanding his own disdain for the drudgery of a scholar's existence. Ladislaw communicates to Casaubon's much younger wife, Dorothea, this sense of the old clergy-man's absurdly distant remoteness from the cutting edge of contemporary scholarship. Ladislaw announces that '"the Germans have taken the lead in historical inquiries, and they laugh at results which are got by groping about in the woods with a pocket-compass while they have made good roads. When I was with Mr Casaubon I saw that he deafened himself in that direction." ⁴ As a consequence, Dorothea, who had married Casaubon as a willing amanuensis of the towering genius she mistakenly identifies in the begetter of 'The Key to All Mythologies', becomes yet further disillusioned with her husband's multifarious pettinesses.

Oddly, for such a nonentity, Mr Casaubon possesses an iconic status well beyond the pages of a book; indeed, *Middlemarch* itself enjoys a reputation and remains beloved as something more than a mere novel.⁵ Casaubon's name is synonymous with arid pedantry and mindless antiquarianism: he is a kind of patron saint of empty underachievement. Eliot calls him 'a lifeless embalmment of knowledge'.⁶ Casaubon represents

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³ Cf. Nuttall, Dead from the waist down.

⁴ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871–2: Harmondsworth, 1965), ch. 21, p. 240. (In footnote references to *Middlemarch*, I give page numbers from the Penguin edition, but also chapter references for those readers with other editions.)

⁵ See e.g. K. Chase (ed.), Middlemarch in the 21st century (Oxford, 2006).

⁶ Eliot, Middlemarch, ch. 20, p. 229.



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lethargy, futility, and – as a dark, wrinkled 'bat of erudition' – that all-too-familiar deformity found in scholars, the cowardly retreat from engagement with the full-bloodedness of life in the round. To identify with Casaubon is to align oneself with a certain kind of bloodless perversity, to reject life. For instance, Ferdinand Mount, the conservative man of letters, presents himself in his memoirs as something of a dry stick, an Englishman of a certain class and generation, who finds irrepressible vitality something which a person should really have tried harder to repress. 'I always take against the heroine who is on the side of Life', Mount confesses, 'which is a side I am not at all sure about ... In *Middlemarch* I long for Mr Casaubon to discover the key to all mythologies so he can say snubs to the ghastly Dorothea. As for Lady Chatterley, when we finally get hold of a copy, my sympathies are entirely with Sir Clifford.'8

The Casaubon figure tends to feature in literature as a figure of absurd presumption. Matthew Kneale's novel *English Passengers* (2000) features the deluded quest in the late 1850s of a Casaubonish clergyman, the Reverend Geoffrey Wilson, who believes he has located the whereabouts of the Garden of Eden in Tasmania. Wilson rides a clerical hobby horse akin to the 'key to all mythologies', in this case a theory of 'divine refrigeration' at odds with the atheistic implications of nineteenth-century geology.⁹ Even where the homage to the figure of Casaubon is less obviously subversive, the end result captures something of Casaubon's leadenness. Casaubon is the name of the central character in Umberto Eco's novel *Foucault's Pendulum* (1988), a modern grail quest whose object is the deciphering of the arcane mysteries which enshroud humanity and its history, but which, not unlike Mr Casaubon's unfinished 'Key to All Mythologies', sags somewhat as a narrative under the weight of its author's and its protagonists' precocious erudition.¹⁰

Mr Casaubon looms particularly large within the field of intellectual history, for he embodies hypertrophied erudition; a condition about which academics, particularly in the humanities, are prone to feel embarrassed, anxious and defensive. Casaubon has become a pathetic symbol of the frustrated scholar thwarted in his studies by the sheer superabundance of sources and commentaries, who ends his unfulfilled career buried under an avalanche of books about books about books.¹¹ Casaubon stands

⁷ *Ibid.*, ch. 21, p. 237.

⁸ Ferdinand Mount, Cold cream (2008: London pbk, 2009), p. 88.

⁹ Matthew Kneale, English passengers (2000: Harmondsworth, 2001), pp. xx, 19–23.

¹⁰ U. Eco, Foucault's pendulum (1988: transl. London, 1989).

For this perennial predicament of scholarly life, see A. Blair, Too much to know: managing scholarly information before the modern age (New Haven, 2010).



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representative of what might be called pejoratively the higher stamp-collecting,¹² the exponent of a scholarship that occupies itself with learned shallows but is utterly lacking in depth. Casaubon's is a life in scholarship exclusively devoted, it seems, to shreds and trifles, to marginalia and footnotes.

This was certainly the intention of Eliot, who describes Casaubon – 'that faded scholar' - as a mere husk of learning. But Eliot's low estimation of her own fictional creation has been taken, understandably, as a determining yardstick for evaluating the significance of mythography as a whole. Were other mythographers quite as puny and insignificant as Eliot's iconic fictional character? We need to remember that Eliot had axes of her own to grind; that she was engaged in serious combat with Christianity, and unwilling to accord too much heft and weight to a character who stood proxy for the stifling orthodoxy she repudiated. Moreover, the novel – however accurate an intended representation of the state of affairs in society – must accommodate the story-telling imperative, or it will fail. In other words, Eliot's well-known depiction of early nineteenth-century mythography is not the last word on the subject; far from it. But *The World* of Mr Casaubon is much more a labour of love than it is a dominie's perverted attempt to mark *Middlemarch* down as a piece of flawed intellectual history. Lest there be any misunderstanding, the intention here is not to upbraid Eliot – a presumptuous notion – but to wallow in irony. This is because the wider world of Mr Casaubon turns out to be very different in certain critical respects from the particular story of Mr Casaubon set out in Middlemarch.

The aim of this book is to use actual mythographers and mythographical strategies mentioned in *Middlemarch* as a foundation for reconstructing the ideological environments of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century mythological debate. In *Middlemarch* Eliot mentions – or alludes indirectly to – several of the most significant antiquaries, theologians and orientalists of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England, as well as their mythographical hobby horses. The itinerary of each of this book's main chapters will start from particular passages in *Middlemarch* which refer to real eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century scholars, such as William Warburton (1698–1779), Conyers Middleton (1683–1750), Jacob Bryant (1715–1804), Robert Lowth (1710–87) and George Stanley Faber (1773–1854), or their preoccupations, such as the interpretation of

¹² Cf. G. Beer, *Darwin's plots: evolutionary narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and nineteenth-century fiction* (1983: 3rd edn, Cambridge, 2009), p. 163.



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the Cabiri (pre-Hellenic gods who were the object of an ancient mystery cult) or the identification of fish-deities, and will then broaden out to examine the debates in which these figures found themselves. The epilogue will present a smorgasbord of the existing mythographical theories extant in 1872 at the time *Middlemarch* was published.

As late as 1830, the period in which Middlemarch is set, the world of mythographical scholarship was still dominated by figures from the eighteenth century. In chapter 29 of Middlemarch it is announced that Casaubon would publish 'a new Parergon' - that is, a supplementary work – 'a small monograph on some lately-traced indications concerning the Egyptian mysteries whereby certain assertions of Warburton's could be corrected'.13 Warburton was the author of the most debated work of eighteenth-century mythography - arguably the most debated text in eighteenth-century English letters - The Divine Legation of Moses (1738-Perhaps the second most significant contribution to eighteenthcentury British mythography was Bryant's A New System or Analysis of Ancient Mythology (1774–6), which surfaces in chapter 22 of Middlemarch, when Ladislaw asks: "Do you not see that it is no use now to be crawling a little way after the men of the last century - men like Bryant - and correcting their mistakes? - living in a lumber room and furnishing up broken-legged theories about Chus and Mizraim?" '14 In the course of the same chapter of Middlemarch, Ladislaw finds himself 'in agreement with Mr Casaubon as to the unsound opinions of Middleton concerning the relations of Judaism and Catholicism'. 15 Middleton was a cunning, semicloseted mid-eighteenth-century freethinker who explored continuities between Roman paganism and Roman Catholicism, while hinting that Christianity more generally was a heathen inheritance.

Other identifications are less straightforward. In chapter 37 Casaubon asks Dorothea, "I shall be obliged, since you are up, if you will read me a few pages of Lowth." 16 But which Lowth? Perhaps this is a reference to William Lowth (1660–1732), who in his *Directions for the Profitable Reading of Scripture* advanced a mythographical defence of the authority of Genesis, noting that 'the heathens' had 'an obscure tradition' of the creation, fall and deluge, but one whose wide diffusion 'doth sufficiently attest the truth of the scripture records'. Lowth reckoned that the 'oldest monuments of the heathen story, and all their ancient theology is derived from

¹³ Eliot, Middlemarch, ch. 29, p. 315.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, ch. 22, p. 254.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. 22, p. 244.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, ch. 37, p. 409.



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the scriptures, though disguised with fables for the confirming their own superstitions and idolatries'. However, it seems more likely that this is a reference to the Hebraist Robert Lowth, Professor of Poetry at Oxford and later Bishop of London, who entered the lists against Warburton. Other references suggest particular mythographers without naming them explicitly. A description of Casaubon 'lost among small closets and winding stairs, and in an agitated dimness about the Cabeiri', 18 alludes to the work of the Christian mythographer George Faber, author of *A Dissertation on the Mysteries of the Cabiri* (1803). We also hear that Dorothea 'had listened with fervid patience to a recitation of possible arguments to be brought against Mr Casaubon's entirely new view of the Philistine god Dagon and other fish-deities'. Here the reference is less particular, for several mythographers debated the significance of fish deities, a fact further acknowledged, perhaps, in the fictional antagonists of Casaubon that Eliot invents: Messrs Pike, Tench and Carp, who are mentioned in chapter 29 of *Middlemarch*. ²⁰

As the eighteenth-century legacy of polemical mythography looms large for Mr Casaubon, so it provides one of the three main contexts for *The World of Mr Casaubon*. Broadly speaking, the book will attempt to recover the arguments of three different eras: first, the eighteenth-century golden age of apologetic mythography; second, the age of Revolution and Reform down to the early 1830s, the period in which the novel is immediately set, when mythography remained an urgent calling for Anglican scholars who wished to conserve Christian truth against the poisons of Enlightenment deism, scepticism and atheism; and third, the years between the 1830s and the novel's publication in 1871–2, during which Eliot's own views of mythography were formed.

The study of pagan mythologies – however abstruse the field of mythography now seems, or indeed seemed to Eliot – constituted a vitally important terrain of political and religious debate throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many religious apologists argued that 'their' myths were merely corrupted versions of 'our' truth; that, by a marvellous providential irony, interpreted correctly the mythologies of non-Christian peoples served to validate the historic truth of the Old Testament. But mirages of this sort did not only delude the orthodox, notwithstanding what Eliot suggests. Critics of scripture had their own delusively unitary solutions,

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William Lowth, Directions for the profitable reading of the Holy Scriptures (3rd edn, London, 1726), pp. 43, 150.

¹⁸ Eliot, Middlemarch, ch. 20, p. 229.

¹⁹ Ibid., ch. 20, p. 228.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. 29, pp. 314–15.



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their own particular 'keys to all mythology', grounded in all-encompassing hypotheses about an aboriginal natural religion, or, later, in philological and anthropological theories of primal belief.

Mythography was far from being a distinctive ecclesiastical category of rural idiocy or the mere cabbage-patch of village Casaubons. Of course, college sets at Oxford and Cambridge and rural parsonages were, as Eliot suggests, the principal habitats of the mythographer. Nevertheless, such was the prestige of classical learning in the upper reaches of society that several aristocrats and gentlemen were drawn into mythographical researches and debates, including a future Prime Minister, Lord Aberdeen (1784–1860).21 Indeed, as we shall see, for another Prime Minister, William Gladstone (1809-98), the relationship of Homeric lore to sacred history was as central a preoccupation as balancing the books at the Treasury or pacifying Ireland.²² Similarly, at the other end of the social hierarchy, radical artisans engaged in mythographical enquiries as a means of undermining the authority of the established church and state. The French Revolution was accompanied by its own radical mythography which used pagan legends not to support but to interrogate Christian scripture. Mythographical debates resounded at every level of society, and internationally too, not least between Britons (Anglicans especially) and French infidels, as well as with the Deistic enemy within. Notwithstanding Eliot's condescension towards Casaubon, mythographical argument - as she knew - was not confined to a backwater.

Before we investigate the practice of mythography, it is worth devoting some space to the provenance of Mr Casaubon, for this subject is not only capable of shedding light on the field of mythography, but is also rich in ironies and unexpected connections. Most obviously, Mr Casaubon's surname calls to mind the celebrated early modern scholars Isaac Casaubon (1559–1614) – the flower of Protestant humanist erudition – and his son Meric Casaubon (1599–1671), also a significant scholar in his day. Isaac Casaubon was noteworthy even in a golden age of classical erudition; he was the contemporary, for example, of the brilliant critic and chronologer Joseph Justus Scaliger (1540–1609).²³ Casaubon – like Scaliger – came of French Huguenot stock, and spent most of his adult life in France, at

²¹ Aberdeen was educated at St John's College, Cambridge, a seat of mythographical learning, and was later a companion of the mythographer Sir William Drummond of Logiealmond (for whom see below chs. 3 and 5).

D. Bebbington, The mind of Gladstone: religion, Homer and politics (Oxford, 2004), pp. 142–215.

²³ A. Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger* (2 vols., Oxford, 1983–93).



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Montpellier and later Paris. However, after the assassination of the French king, Henri IV, in 1610 he prudently accepted the invitation of Richard Bancroft, the Archbishop of Canterbury, to come to London, and to the agreeably learned atmosphere presided over by the prodigiously erudite James VI and I. Here Casaubon spent the last years of his life attempting to complete his enormous humanistic labours and engaging in ecclesiastical polemic with the papacy and its champions. Although Casaubon never completed his major project on Polybius, he did – unlike Mr Casaubon – produce versions of Strabo, Suetonius, Aristotle, the Deipnosophistae of Athenaeus, and in 1592 a remarkably erudite edition of the extant *Characters* of Theophrastus.24

If Mr Casaubon's pet project was to use pagan mythology in defence of Christian truth, it is ironic in this light that the most significant scholarly achievement of his namesake Isaac Casaubon was to undermine the status of ancient pagan sources which had appeared to predict the coming of Christ. Isaac Casaubon had been invited to London in large part because it was hoped he might answer the massive bombardment of the biggest cannon in Catholic polemical scholarship, Cardinal Baronius's Annales ecclesiastici (1588–1607). In the course of his answer to Baronius, De rebus sacris et ecclesiasticis exercitationes xvi (1614), Casaubon challenged the claim of Baronius that the divine will had been known in pagan circles long before the coming of Christ ('longe ante Christi adventum').25 He patiently deconstructed the casual reliance of Baronius on the assertions of the patristic writer Lactantius that the coming of Christ had been foreshadowed in certain pagan works, including the writings of the fabled Egyptian priest Hermes Trismegistus and the oracles of the ancient prophetesses, the Sibyls.²⁶ Casaubon used his skills as a textual critic to demonstrate that the Hermetic writings recycled Platonic and Christian materials, contained knowledge and allusions to matters which long postdated the supposed era of Trismegistus and were composed in a Greek style which was far less consonant with archaic forms than with diction and idioms used by Greeks of a later era ('qua posteriores Graeci sunt usi').²⁷ Nor was there any mention

²⁵ Isaac Casaubon, *De rebus sacris et ecclesiasticis exercitationes xvi* (London, 1614), p. 71.

²⁴ Theophrasti Characteres ethici (Leiden, 1592); A. Grafton and J. Weinberg, 'I have always loved the holy tongue': Isaac Casaubon, the Jews and a forgotten chapter in renaissance scholarship (Cambridge, MA, 2011), pp. 4-5, 15-17.

²⁶ Casaubon, De rebus sacris, pp. 70-87; F. Yates, Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic tradition (1964: London and New York, 1999), pp. 398-403; A. Grafton, 'Protestant versus prophet: Isaac Casaubon on Hermes Trismegistus', Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute, vol. 46 (1983), pp. 78–93.
²⁷ Casaubon, *De rebus sacris*, p. 86.



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of Hermes Trismegistus or the Sibyls throughout the early canon of pagan authors ('nullum penitus extat vestigium').²⁸ In other words, the writings of Hermes Trismegistus were an early Christian – or Christian–Platonist – forgery purporting to belong to an earlier period.²⁹

If we turn our attention back to Eliot's Mr Casaubon, we are struck here by an additional irony: the name we now associate with deluded apologetic futility was borrowed not from a backwoods bigot or dunce, but from a scholar of genius who had exposed as a fraud the patristic claim that ancient pagan authorities had been bearers of primeval proto-Christian truth. In a bizarre reversal of our expectations, Isaac Casaubon – who was, we discover, far from Casaubonish – had successfully demolished an ancient forerunner of the 'key to all mythologies'.

Nevertheless, Isaac's son, Meric Casaubon, also a distinguished scholar, was himself implicated in mythography and the Christian appropriation of pagan idolatry. In 1624 a puritan treatise entitled The Originall of Idolatries was mistakenly ascribed to Isaac Casaubon. Out of filial piety, Meric published a defence of his father, Vindicatio patris, adversus impostores qui librum ineptum et impium, De origine idolatriae etc nuper sub Isaaci Casuboni nomine publicarunt (1624), explaining that the work was not Isaac's but had been foisted upon him. Meric had his own interests in pagan religion and its relationship to the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Indeed, in the 1640s Meric would write a manuscript treatise – now lost – in Latin on the origin of idolatry. However, it is possible to reconstruct from other writings, as Richard Serjeantson has shown, some of Meric's beliefs about ancient heathendom. That world was not, for instance, utterly benighted or bereft of authentic spiritual insight. Meric Casaubon seems to have been persuaded by the thesis – influential among early modern scholars – that classical pagans had inherited from primeval antiquity, or from the Jews directly, some lineaments of the primeval religion of Noah and the divine promises to mankind; in particular, Meric took the view, also widely held, that Virgil's fourth Eclogue had foreshadowed with prophetic accuracy the coming of Christ.30

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 77–9.

R. Serjeantson, 'Introduction', Serjeantson (ed.), Generall learning: a seventeenth-century treatise on the formation of the general scholar by Meric Casaubon (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 5, 48, 50; P. Milward, Religious controversies of the Jacobean age (London, 1978), pp. 214–15; A. Milton, Catholic and reformed: the Roman and Protestant churches in English Protestant thought 1600–1640 (Cambridge, 1995), p. 92.