

1995

## Thou Shalt Not Read: Maggie's Arrested Development in *The Mills on the Floss*

Karen E. Hottle

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English](#), [British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

Hottle, Karen E., "Thou Shalt Not Read: Maggie's Arrested Development in *The Mills on the Floss*" (1995). *The George Eliot Review*. 250.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/250>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

**Karen E. Hottle**  
**THOU SHALT NOT READ:**  
**Maggie's Arrested Development in *The Mill on the Floss***

*The Mill on the Floss* opens and closes with visions of a girl out of place – initially in a dream and finally in a grave. In between, this lost soul tries to find her way in the world, and she often uses books as her guides. While books give the young Maggie a certain freedom, her status as a woman in the society into which she is born forces her to read in certain ways which constrain and eventually destroy her.

The opening scenes of the novel establish Maggie's place in the hierarchy of learning. Mr Tulliver's first words – actually the first words spoken in the novel – are, 'What I want, you know, . . . is to give Tom a good eddication, an eddication as'll be a bread to him'.<sup>1</sup> This education is a gift, passed on from father to son, and part of a distinctly male tradition. Although Mr Tulliver himself has not had much formal schooling, he realizes that an education will help his son to get ahead in life, and he explains that 'I should like Tom to be a bit of a scholar, so as he might be up to the tricks o' these fellows as talk fine and write with a flourish.... [Tom should enter] one o' them smartish businesses as are all profits and no outlay' (9). Tom's ability to read and write will get him 'bread' and 'profits', allowing him to make his own way in the world.

If Maggie were to seek a female perspective on education, she would have to turn to her mother, who is concerned only that Tom should go 'where I can wash him and mend him. . . . And then, when the box is goin' backards and forrards, I could send the lad a cake, or a pork-pie, or an apple' (10). Her only wish is that Tom go to a place where she can continue to take care of him. Mr Tulliver projects Tom's life into the future, and compares his own life to that which an education will give his son, while Mrs Tulliver neither has nor seeks a place in this male world of education.

Before Mr and Mrs Tulliver even mention Maggie, then, their ideas about the male's role in life and the female's role in life are clear. When they do discuss Maggie, they do not even begin to consider that she should receive an education, but rather see her intelligence and creativity as character flaws. While Mr Tulliver admires her intelligence, he also admits that 'It's no mischief much while she's a little un, but an over-'cute woman's no better nor a long-tailed sheep – she'll fetch none the bigger price for that' (12). His wife will not even give Maggie that much support, exclaiming 'it runs to naughtiness.... if I send her up-stairs to fetch anything, she forgets what she's gone for, an' perhaps 'ull sit down on the floor i' the sunshine an' plait her hair an' sing to herself like a Bedlam creatur' (12). The two seem to agree that Maggie is not well suited for the kind of life they envision for her, but they do not suggest that she has any other options open to her.

Because Maggie is not meant to be 'over-'cute', she is not often called upon to use her intelligence. Even when Mr Tulliver allows her to read for Mr Riley, he seems to be bring-

ing her out as a spectacle, a trick pony, and he quickly stops her when he feels that she has gone too far, saying, 'It is as I thought – the child 'ull learn more mischief nor good wi' the books. Go, go, and see after your mother' (18). To Mr Tulliver, Maggie's ability to read does not give her value, but rather reflects his own. As he tells Mr Riley, 'you see when a man's got brains himself, there's no knowing where they'll run to' (18). Once he has brought Maggie out as a proof of his own intelligence, Mr Tulliver relegates her to her mother's care.

Even though her family does not encourage her to develop her intellect, Maggie feels that it is an asset which can increase her value in the world. Thus, we see that, when she reads for Mr Riley, 'Maggie's cheeks began to flush with triumphant excitement: she thought Mr Riley would have a respect for her now; it had been evident that he thought nothing of her before' (16). This flush of excitement is among the first glimpses into Maggie's consciousness that Eliot gives us, and it reveals a young girl with pride in herself and her accomplishments. Maggie herself has confidence that she can change someone's opinion of her by demonstrating her intelligence. The girl whom Mr Tulliver had earlier proudly stated could 'read almost as well as the parson' (12) will attempt to escape the 'nothingness' of being a small girl by proving herself in the more masculine domain of reading.

Maggie's attempt to assert herself, however, is soon thwarted. Mr Tulliver stops her short, and even Mr Riley simply mocks her, asking her 'in an admonitory patronising tone' (17) if she has any prettier books, and answering her heartfelt question about Tom with a jocosely reference to a fairy tale. Riley's reaction makes Maggie realize that, despite her abilities, 'he thought her silly and of no consequence' (22). Her first attempt to use books to help define herself has failed, unappreciated and cut short by the authority figures whom she had wanted to impress.

While Maggie reads, and reads well, she also goes beyond the words on the printed page. As she tells Mr Riley, 'I know the reading in this book isn't pretty – but I like the pictures, and I make stories to the pictures out of my own head' (17). This creative ability to think for herself and go beyond the bounds of the printed page suggests that Maggie could also seek a place for herself in the world, unhindered by the traditions that limit her parents' ideas of her potential. In one of her stories, Maggie thinks about spiders, and wonders 'if they had any relatives outside the mill, for in that case there must be a painful difficulty in their family intercourse' (27). Maggie thus reveals herself to be aware of a wider world than that of the mill, and recognizes that it is a place which allows for difference, even within families.

Maggie goes to seek this wider world when her tempestuous nature leads her into trouble. She runs away to the gypsies, whom she feels will 'gladly receive her, and pay her much respect on account of her superior knowledge' (94). Again, Maggie tries to redefine herself on the basis of her knowledge. At first, her plan works well: 'It was just like a story: Maggie liked to be called pretty lady and treated in this way' (97). Soon, we see that 'Maggie's eyes had begun to sparkle and her cheeks to flush – she was really beginning

to instruct the gypsies, and gaining great influence over them' (98). As she had before, Maggie comes truly alive when she feels that she has authority, and this authority is based on the knowledge she has gained through her reading.

Although Maggie is confident that she can feel at home among the gypsies, her feelings soon change. The first hint of her disillusionment is when she sees 'a rough urchin about the age of Tom' (99), and the loneliness that this produces turns to 'new terror, when two men [come] up' (99). As the men look at her possessions and determine their value, Maggie realizes that 'Tom must be right about the gypsies – they must certainly be thieves' (100). Her negative feelings remind her of Tom, the authority figure whom she most tries to please with the least success, and her recognition of her powerlessness coincides with the return of the men to a site previously inhabited only by women and children.

If it is the return of the men that makes Maggie sensible of danger, it is, of course, her own acts that have put her in this dangerous position. She is living too fully in the realm of her mind, attempting to make a story come to life. Maggie even calls upon literary heroes to save her, thinking, 'if Jack the Giant-killer, or Mr Greatheart, or St George who slew the dragon on the halfpennies, would happen to pass that way! But Maggie thought with a sinking heart that these heroes were never seen in the neighbourhood of St Ogg's' (100). For Maggie, the problem is not that these heroes do not exist, for in her mind they do. Instead, she simply laments the fact that they are not likely to rescue her from this terror.

As if to excuse Maggie's inability to distinguish between life and a fairy tale, Eliot notes that

Maggie . . . was by no means that well-trained, well-informed young person that a small female of eight or nine necessarily is these days.... in travelling over her small mind you would have found the most unexpected ignorance as well as unexpected knowledge.... her thoughts generally were the oddest mixture of clear-eyed acumen and blind dreams. (100)

This somewhat ironic aside allows Eliot to begin to explore the relationship between 'book learning', knowledge drawn from experience, and creative intelligence. Maggie displays each at different times, but is never allowed to develop all three in a productive way. They thus become, to a greater or a lesser degree, means by which she draws attention or affection from others, and are not integrated as they should be to create a unified intellect. Maggie's attempt to join the gypsies and teach them fails because she knows them only from fairy tales, not from any fact-based teachings. Her life up to this point is based on a limited knowledge, and she lives in a subjective reality, the odd mixture described by Eliot. To Maggie, books are real; they give her the information that her growing mind craves as well as the freedom to create and explore her own ideas about herself and the world around her. She does not, however, have the ability to discriminate between fact and fiction, or to question what she reads. Her 'small mind' may be like a country over which

one can travel, but it seems to be a country in need of development.

Maggie's mind needs to be encouraged, trained and informed, but this option is always denied her. Tom refuses to listen to her stories, and, when she attempts to involve him in a story about a lion (a creature that she has only read about in a book), he will only '[turn] away contemptuously, saying, "But the lion *isn't* coming. What's the use of talking?"' (32). Later on, when Maggie tries to share Tom's experience by reading his books instead of trying to draw him into hers, he denies her even that joy and knowledge by drawing Mr Stelling into stating that '[girls have] a great deal of superficial cleverness; but they couldn't go far into anything. They're quick and shallow' (134). Maggie's one strength and source of pride is defined by Mr Stelling as a weakness, and she is 'mortified' (134). Eliot's use of the word 'mortified' suggests that this is almost a death-blow to the young girl's sense of herself. In an echo of the scene with Mr Riley, Mr Stelling also makes fun of Maggie when she attempts to display her intelligence, leaving her in fear that 'Mr Stelling, after all did not think much of her' (133). All of her early attempts to enter into some sort of educational dialogue with authority end in Maggie's failure and increasing self-doubt.

By the time of her family's greatest misfortunes, Maggie seems to have nowhere to turn. Eliot describes her as 'thirsty for all knowledge; with an ear straining after dreamy music that died away and would not come near to her; with a blind, unconscious yearning for something that would link together the mysterious impressions of this mysterious life' (208). Not only is Maggie still untrained and in need of knowledge, as she was with the gypsies, but she is even farther from being able to receive any instructions. She is hungry and yearning, but the knowledge she needs, like the music she longs to hear, cannot reach her, because it is not her place to learn.

When Maggie later looks at the books that Bob Jakin has brought her, it is only after her attempts to teach herself from Tom's books have been interrupted by the attention she must pay to her domestic duties (251-52). She seems especially taken by one by Thomas à Kempis. Since her attempts to use her intelligence and prove her worth have met with so little encouragement or approval from those around her, it is hardly surprising that Maggie chooses only certain aspects of this work upon which to build her future. We see that 'for the first time she saw the possibility of shifting the position from which she looked at the gratification of her own desires – of taking her stand out of herself, and looking at her own life as an insignificant part of a divinely-guided whole' (254). This new perspective will not help Maggie to grow and expand her horizons, as her earlier encounters with books had led her to do. Instead, it diminishes her, making her see herself as insignificant. By internalizing this doctrine, which, as Eliot points out, she does not fully understand (255), Maggie, in effect, concedes that she cannot continue to assert herself in a world that thwarts her every attempt to do so. Indeed, she is soon rewarded for taking this new view of herself, as Eliot notes that 'the mother was getting fond of her tall, brown girl' (257).

Only Philip Wakem sees this change as a danger to Maggie and attempts to give her encouragement to read and live again. Her responses to his attempts reveal just how fully she has accepted this new perspective. She tells him that 'Our life is determined for us – and it makes the mind very free when we give up wishing, and only think of bearing what is laid upon us, and doing what is given us to do' (264). Later, she adds, 'I think we are only like children, that some one who is wiser is taking care of. Is it not right to resign ourselves entirely, whatever may be denied us? I have found great peace in that for the last two or three years – even joy in subduing my own will' (286). Maggie defines the loss of her own will as a change that has a positive result, and thinks that she has given it up voluntarily. It seems, however, that her will has met with so much resistance that she has had to subdue it in order to survive within her family and her society.

With Philip's guidance, Maggie does indeed begin to read again. She even begins to recover some of her old imaginative power, as she states a wish 'to avenge Rebecca and Flora MacIvor, and Minna, and all the rest of the dark unhappy ones' (291). Her new interest in books, however, is different from her previous one. As she tells Philip, 'your mind is a sort of world to me: you can tell me all I want to know' (294), and she no longer has a flush of inspiration. Whereas she had earlier chosen books in order to improve her mind and educate herself, she now reads only the novels that Philip gives her. She has given up her will, not to God, but to Philip. When Lucy questions her about her feelings for Philip, she explains, not that she loves him and wants to be with him, but that 'I think it would be the best and highest lot for me – to make his life happy' (384). Although this desire to do what is best for Philip is partially a result of her attempt to renounce Stephen Guest, it also seems a return to the renunciation of her own will that Philip had briefly interrupted.

Maggie's relationship with Stephen Guest gives her one last chance to reclaim her will. It does not seem entirely impossible that a woman who once ran away from her family to join the gypsies would again reject society's norms and strictures by running away with a man who is almost engaged to her cousin. Instead, the entire episode of the 'elopement' reveals her utter passivity and lack of individual will. Eliot's language in recounting the boat trip echoes Maggie's language in defending her 'new perspective' to Philip. When Maggie and Stephen depart, 'Maggie felt that she was being led down the garden, . . . being helped with firm tender care into the boat. . . all by this stronger presence that seemed to bear her along without any act of her own will' (407). Here, Maggie again takes the part of a little child being protected by someone wiser (286), only now it is Stephen rather than Philip or even God who is taking care of her. She agrees to go along with Stephen's plans in part because of the 'unspeakable charm in being told what to do, and having everything decided for her' (409), just as she had earlier resigned herself to 'divine guidance' (254) and 'doing what is given us to do' (264).

Although Maggie surrenders her will to Stephen when she elopes with him, she does not reclaim it when she chooses to cut short the elopement. While she does tell Stephen that 'It has never been my will to marry you' (418), she never tells him what she would like to do for herself. Instead, she explains her aversion to the elopement by stating that 'I could-

n't live in peace if I put the shadow of a wilful sin between myself and God' (418), and also that 'I know how [Philip] thought of me as the one promise of his life. He was given to me that I might make his lot less hard; and I have forsaken him' (419-420). Maggie leaves Stephen, then, not as a way of asserting herself, but as a way of returning to God and to Philip, the two authority figures to whom she now feels most responsible. One might argue that this is an assertion of herself, because she defines herself in her relationships to these two. Eliot, however, almost writes Maggie out of the action surrounding her departure. We see that:

Maggie was not conscious of a decision as she turned away from that gloomy averted face, and walked out of the room: it was like an automatic action that fulfils a forgotten intention. What came after? A sense of stairs descended as if in a dream – of flagstones – of a chaise and horses standing – then a street, and a turning into another street where a stage-coach was standing, taking in passengers – and the darting thought that that coach would take her away, perhaps towards home. But she could ask nothing yet; she only got into the coach. (420)

Maggie is so passive that she does not even seem to exist. Eliot presents only a stream of dreamlike images of automatic action in which the actor disappears, just as Maggie's soul seems to have disappeared in her unsuccessful struggles to gain knowledge and define herself. While the novel continues after Maggie and Stephen separate, the final chapters simply chronicle Maggie's gradual disappearance from society and her early death. Even though Eliot describes a potential happy ending to this story (428-29), it cannot hold. Maggie's death is not merely inevitable; it has already occurred. The tide that sweeps her away is not the final flood, but is instead the constant, steady erosion of her idea of herself as an intelligent person, worthy of respect and capable of thinking and acting for herself. Marian Evans perhaps had to assert her own identity while she was writing *The Mill on the Floss* in order to fulfil her potential as a novelist. The book seems to be an exorcism of the demons of self-doubt, and an exercise which allows Evans to separate herself from the weaknesses she has overdramatized in Maggie and to reaffirm in herself the strengths that Maggie was not allowed to develop.

#### Note

1. George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), 9. All further references are to this edition and are included parenthetically in the text.