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Review of Literature and Medicine in Nineteenth-Century Britain

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Janis McLarren Caldwell, *Literature and Medicine in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 201. ISBN 0 521 843340

The title of this study somewhat belies its range and ambition. Caldwell offers a compelling account of the connections between medicine, hermeneutics and theology in the early and mid-century, and uses these related disciplines as the bases of intriguing new readings of literary texts – unsurprisingly including *Middlemarch*. Caldwell brings to her work the (in literary studies) unusual perspective of a former practising doctor; this allows her to blend a sophisticated discussion of historical debates around knowledge and belief about the material and the divine in the nineteenth century with an immediate sense of the physical reality of medical treatments and doctor-patient relationships. Caldwell's main argument centres on the 'two books' metaphor of natural theology, which organizes knowledge of the world under the 'texts' of Scripture and Nature. These, she maintains, should be seen less as the polar opposites of historical cliché than as the elements of an ongoing, productive and unresolved dialectic, and she goes on to trace the presence of the two in a range of guises throughout the period covered in the book, coining the term 'Romantic materialism' to signify various writers' common engagement not just with the material and the godly but with the mind and body, narrative-based and empirical knowledge and typology and concrete instance. One important part of Caldwell's argument is to take issue with Foucauldian accounts of the position of medicine in culture: she proposes a change of focus away from the idea of medicine as a disciplinary discourse, instead showing how the doctor-patient relationship may take the form of a productive dialogue between different orders of knowledge – especially between the 'objective' data yielded by the physician's examination of the patient, and that patient's subjective, socially situated account of his or her experiences. Caldwell connects this combination of different kinds of knowledge with the broader set of dialectics in nineteenth-century culture characterized by the 'two books' metaphor.

This theoretical basis yields a number of stimulating contextualized readings of literary texts. There is discussion of *Frankenstein* as an interrogation of Romantic and physiological concepts of 'sympathy', of Carlyle as a 'dualist with a penchant for the material world' (p. 59), and of Charlotte Brontë – here, among other things, Caldwell makes a strong case for the 'gaze' of *Villette*'s Dr John and M. Paul not just as an expression of male disciplinary power but, more interestingly, as the possible medium of emotional intimacy. As these examples suggest, the scope of Caldwell's argument is wide, and this sometimes threatens to occlude the diversity of the various writers' backgrounds and interests, and the historical and ideological significance of aspects of the texts under discussion. Caldwell's linking of T. H. Huxley, Richard Owen and Charles Darwin as fellow inheritors of 'Romantic materialist' ideas is a welcome addition to our sense of the complex interactions of religion and science in the period, yet her account gives little sense of, say, the specific place each occupied in relation to scientific and educational institutions and the print media. Though this lies outside Caldwell's particular remit, a little more acknowledgment of such matters would lend her argument greater weight. A more serious problem arises in the historical trajectory which Caldwell posits. In her view, Darwin, though initially an adherent of 'Romantic materialism', brings to an end the era of its cultural currency by adopting, in the later parts of his *Autobiography*, the dry, impersonal style of scientific writing which was to become dominant over the next century. Yet it isn't entirely clear whether Darwin himself is being blamed for this change, or whether he is an instance of a much broader movement. In any case Caldwell's thesis must be open to question given the

continued interest of scientists such as George Henry Lewes and William James – to name just two – in the nature of knowledge and in the relations between mind, matter and spirit, and in view of their (by today's scientific standards) conversational written styles. The chronological limit which she sets, that is, over-emphasizes the importance of Darwin as a watershed figure and underplays the extent to which his ideas grow out of, and participate in, an ongoing set of debates.

The book ends with a chapter on '*Middlemarch* and the medical case report'. Caldwell's own clinical experience makes for some fascinating insights into the changing relationship between doctor and patient, and gives added interest to her discussion of the relationship between Lydgate and Dorothea, which forms the chapter's main focus. Instead of viewing their relationship solely in the context of medical discourse as a medium of power, Caldwell maintains that we should think of it in terms of a positive interaction between Lydgate's medical knowledge and Dorothea's moral idealism and concern with human relationships. Each helps to supply the other's deficiencies through their ongoing, dynamic dialogue and this, Caldwell argues, is a suggestive model for the physician, too: medical practice should utilize both scientific observation and a greater empathy with patients and their personal testimonies. A possible quibble here is that one might come away from Caldwell's account with the impression that Eliot is endorsing a traditionally gendered model of psychology, with the male identified with rationality and the female with emotional intelligence. Caldwell's argument is much more subtle and interesting than this, but she perhaps under-emphasizes Dorothea's strong capacity to reason and question as well as feel – a crucial combination for Eliot, of course.

The chapter draws appropriately on David Carroll's seminal discussion of hermeneutics in Eliot's writing, and adds its own very interesting medical slant to questions of knowledge in *Middlemarch*. Perhaps inevitably given its very specific focus and strong grounding in the history of medicine (Caldwell draws on a wide range of medical and physiological texts throughout the book), the discussion of Lydgate and Dorothea doesn't quite loop back to broader epistemological issues, and questions about Eliot's realism, in the way that it might. That said, there is a significant revision of J. Hillis Miller's analysis of the novel, Caldwell's argument centring on light and web metaphors as elements which work in ongoing dialectic with each other, rather than as mutually deconstructive strands of imagery which undermine the narrator's claims to omniscience. This reading resonates convincingly in the context of Caldwell's wider discussion, though she perhaps unfairly sees Miller's account as claiming superiority for the critic over the narrator, rather than as bearing witness to the rich and complex exploration of the nature of knowledge in which Eliot engages.

Despite some possible objections, then, this is an intriguing and exciting book. It is erudite and richly complex, yet clearly written and adventurous in its scope and argument. Caldwell's discussion of medicine in *Middlemarch* does more than move on from the – by now rather tired – Foucauldian concept of the clinic: it offers a new and inspiring insight into Eliot's sense of the complexities of intersubjective communication, and of the moral importance which she attaches to this. Caldwell's should remain a thought-provoking study for students of Eliot and of nineteenth-century literature and science generally.

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