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1985

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Linda K. Robertson

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Robertson, Linda K., "IGNORANCE AND POWER: George Eliot's Attack on Professional Incompetence" (1985). *The George Eliot Review*. 24.  
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## IGNORANCE AND POWER :

### George Eliot's Attack on Professional Incompetence

By Linda K. Robertson

Throughout both her essays and her fiction, George Eliot shows little patience with ignorance. In the epigraph to chapter 21 of Daniel Deronda she states, "It is a common sentence that Knowledge is power; but who hath duly considered or set forth the power of Ignorance?" (bk. 1) The failure of an individual to fulfill his role in society with a reasonable level of competence because of inadequate knowledge or an inability to apply information properly is a matter for concern. Beginning with her earliest fiction, Eliot uses characterisation and plot to demonstrate her contempt for a wide spectrum of incompetence.

By today's standards, most occupations were comparatively unregulated in the nineteenth century, and even the traditional professions lacked effective external or internal guidelines to ensure a reliable standard of performance. Therefore, a significant number of professionals did not have adequate education in their fields, possessed only outdated information, were unrestrained in unethical practices, or were simply lacking in ability. Eliot focuses her harshest criticism of ineptitude on characters in the clergy, law, and medicine -- those who, because of their prestige and their power over the behaviour and welfare of others, were in positions to do the greatest harm.

Eliot presents glaring examples of incompetence

among clergymen who work with congregations, those who appear primarily as teachers, and those whose main interest is scholarship.

Amos Barton, in "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton," is a good-hearted person but lacking in common sense and unable to develop rapport with those under his care. He is not intellectually equipped to be a clergyman and has a "natural incapacity for teaching" (ch. 2). His inability to deliver a sermon appropriate to its audience is demonstrated by the disastrous discourse on unleavened bread presented at the poor-house in his parish. Barton has also had a sermon, "exceedingly well adapted to trouble and confuse the Sheppertonian mind," printed in The Pulpit (ch. 2). The problems he has with the English language shock his more fastidious parishioners. Eliot explains that the "persons least surprised at the Rev. Amos's deficiencies were his clerical brethren, who had gone through the (university) mysteries themselves" (ch. 2). Mrs. Hackit sums up Barton accurately when she says, "he's a good sort o' man, for all he's not over burthened i' the upper storey" (ch. 1).

One of Eliot's most memorable clergymen is Walter Stelling who supplements his income by taking private pupils such as Tom Tulliver. Stelling is an Oxford man, but he knows little about teaching. Eliot does not blame Stelling so much as she criticises the system of which he is a product: "If we are to have one regimen for all minds, his seems to me as good as any other. I only know it turned out as uncomfortably for Tom Tulliver as if he had been plied with cheese in order to remedy a gastric weakness which prevented him from digesting it" (The Mill on the Floss, bk. 2, ch. 1). Stelling will not diverge from what he believes is the

only way to teach, and he refuses to "enfeeble and emasculate his pupil's mind by simplifying or explaining" (bk. 2, ch. 1). Eliot does not explore Stelling's effects on his parishioners; however, the comment that he was not bothered by any "excessive accuracy or extent of his own scholarship" makes one wonder about the quality of his sermons (bk. 2, ch. 1).

A more typical example of the ineffective clergyman-teacher is kindly, incompetent old Mr. Crewe, the curate in "Janet's Repentance," who "delivered inaudible sermons on a Sunday, and on a weekday imparted the education of a gentleman -- that is to say, an arduous inacquaintance with Latin through the medium of the Eton grammar -- to three pupils in the upper grammar school" (ch. 2).

Eliot reminds us that she set The Mill on the Floss (like "Janet's Repentance") in an earlier part of the century, but she also expresses the opinion that the intervening years have brought little change: "All this, you remember, happened in those dark ages when there were no schools of design -- before school-masters were invariably men of scrupulous integrity, and before the clergy were all men of enlarged minds and varied culture" (Mill, bk. 2, ch. 4). Although she sometimes comments on their effectiveness as pastors in considerable detail, Eliot emphasises the private problems and pursuits more than the professional lives of clergymen who are major characters. Edward Casaubon is, of course, the outstanding example of the incompetent clergyman-scholar. One can only be grateful that such a man was wealthy enough that he did not have to earn a salary by inflicting his pettiness and fruitless research upon a whole congregation of victims.

Like the incompetent clergyman, the ignorant or unscrupulous lawyer can bring about confusion and disillusionment in others; he can also cause financial ruin. Eliot emphasises the results of the study of law and the reasons characters chose the profession more than the process of legal education or actual practice. Although a few of Eliot's honourable characters study law at least briefly, only Rex Gascoigne, in Daniel Deronda, approaches the prospect of being a lawyer with undiluted enthusiasm. The general assessment of lawyers is not high in Eliot's novels, but nowhere else is the condemnation of the profession so concisely stated as when Tom Tulliver's father announces his plans for the boy's education: "I wouldn't make a downright lawyer o' the lad -- I should be sorry for him to be a raskill..."(bk. 1, ch. 2). Eliot's most memorable practising attorneys are notable for their own ignorance and lack of principles, and even more for their ability to prey on the greater ignorance of others.

Matthew Jermyn, the prosperous and unscrupulous attorney in Felix Holt, is an "amateur gentleman" (ch. 2). Jermyn has worked hard to attain the trappings of prosperity, and he will not hesitate to cheat a client, suppress evidence, or indulge in subtle blackmail to maintain his position. Although he has learned to use the law to his own advantage, he has not learned anything about moral principles. In fact, as Eliot notes, the man is "shame-proof" (ch. 42).

Robert Dempster, an alcoholic prone to fits of violence, is one of the leading lawyers of Milby in "Janet's Repentance." His clients are proud of his unscrupulousness and his amazing ability to consume quantities of alcohol. Once considered

the "cleverest man in Milby," Dempster prides himself on his knowledge (ch. 3). Even if he knows nothing about a particular subject, he can win an argument through his ability to make up facts and to ridicule his opponent's ignorance. Whatever else he might be, Dempster is a skilful lawyer, but he is as unable in his private life as in his profession to admit that he might not know everything and might even be wrong.

Medical education, like legal education, experienced great change and development in the nineteenth century. Eliot includes various sorts of medical practitioners in her novels, and she develops in considerable detail the conflicts within the profession regarding qualifications for practice, theories of treatment, and acceptance of innovative diagnostic methods.

Before his disillusionment, Tertius Lydgate -- as the idealistic, debt-free young surgeon of Middlemarch -- hopes to improve the competence of medical practitioners.

Lydgate is combating ignorance such as that of Dr. Kimble in Silas Marner, whose basic philosophy is that it is "well to try what could do no harm" (ch. 16). Lydgate's diagnostic skills also surpass those of the established medical men in Middlemarch, both the members of the Royal College of Physicians and his fellow apothecary-surgeons. Obviously, this does not please the men who see him as an upstart and a competitor. In addition, Lydgate takes a stand against the consumption of massive doses of medication in the hope that some of it will help a specific complaint or benefit the general constitution. Eliot comments in Middlemarch:

Since professional practice chiefly consisted in giving a great many drugs, the public inferred that it might be better off with more drugs still . . . and hence swallowed large cubic measure of physic prescribed by unscrupulous ignorance which had taken no degrees. (bk. 1, ch. 15).

A significant illustration of this situation appears in Felix Holt: Felix's father manufactured an elixir, pills, and a cancer cure. Holt's concoctions sound disgusting and dangerous, but they are probably little worse than treatments prescribed by such supposedly qualified practitioners as Mr. Wrench of Middlemarch and Mr. Pratt of Milby, who adhere to the "strengthening treatment" as their basic cure, and their opposites Mr. Toller and Mr. Pilgrim, who prefer the "lowering" approach.

Through the end of the nineteenth century and after, the clergy, lawyers, and medical practitioners became subject to increasing regulation. More professional education was also available or required. However, during the period covered by Eliot's fiction, no single group of people had such uncontrolled power, prestige, and influence on the lives of others as members of the three traditional non-military professions. No other group had such potential to show either the power of knowledge or the power of ignorance.