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GEORGE ELIOT'S EPIGRAPHS : A NOTE

by R.J.Owens, University of East Asia, Macau

"Though she be dead, yet let me think she lives,
And feed my mind, that dies for want of her"

Marlowe. Tamburlaine.

George Eliot followed the conventions of her time in titling her novels either after their hero or heroine or the setting where the action takes place. Later she began to give titles to each chapter, or to the individual "Books" which made up the complete novel, or to both. Since the titular hero was sometimes not the only or the main centre of interest in the novel, for example in Felix Holt or Daniel Deronda, the practice of giving titles to "Books" helped, in the usual circumstances of nineteenth century publishing, to point the reader's attention to the appropriate aspect of the developing fiction. The effect intended is: Now I'm going to deal with this particular part of my story.

To remind a Review reader of these elementary facts, so common and so commonly taken for granted, would call for an apology were it not for a further and rather more interesting step which George Eliot takes. In Felix Holt, Middlemarch and Daniel Deronda she introduces each of her chapters with an epigraph. Thus the focussing mechanics employed are these: the novel has a title, the constituent books may have titles and the constituent chapters may have titles or epigraphs.

Introducing a chapter with an epigraph in verse or prose was, of course, nothing new. I suspect George Eliot picked it up from her old favourite Sir Walter Scott. She pays tribute to him in a particularly relevant epigraph to Chapter 57 of Middlemarch (hereafter referred to thus: M. 57) where the epigraph is an original sonnet to Scott. However, as I hope to show, George Eliot's epigraphs are more interesting than Scott's, if for no other reason than that half of them are her own compositions.

The question remains: Why did she do it? What are they for? Does anybody remember them after the little more than perfunctory glance they attract? Without looking, could the present reader recall the epigraph to this note? Yet their very presence indicates a considerable amount of thought and research. Perhaps for no more than that they deserve a second look, for nothing that George Eliot published was casually or carelessly done. The commonly unnoticed epigraphs are as much the product of what has been called her "powerful, trained and formidably well-equipped mind" as are the novels themselves. It seems to me that part of the attraction they have for the reader interested in anything George Eliot wrote is the ample extent to which they justify the quoted adjectives. Others, perhaps, are the ways in which they suggest George Eliot's silent enjoyment in accepting the game-challenge of finding an apt epigraph and reflect the growing sombreness and didacticism which had taken grip on her outlook by the time Daniel Deronda was created. But before the noted sombreness the epigraphs offer tokens of George Eliot's demonstrable attributes: her erudition, her idealistic sentiment, her sense of fun, her moralising bent and her love of aphorism. And, in any case, much of Daniel Deronda is pretty sombre.

To an extent, then, George Eliot's choice of epigraphs, quoted or original and taken together, seem to me a revealing source of her wider beliefs, attitudes, hopes, sentiments and convictions. The reader will please note the qualifying phrase "to an extent". To what extent is a matter for private judgment, since the epigraph's primary focus is on the narrower content of a chapter.

These are over 200 epigraphs and sometimes more than one per chapter. Of these over 90 are

George Eliot originals and it is surely not without interest that the total gleanings of her verse epigraphs amount to some 475 lines. In Daniel Deronda there is much more prose than in the other two works but along with it about 120 lines of verse. I have already mentioned the sonnet (M 57) to Sir Walter Scott. This is exceptional. The majority of the verse epigraphs, being epigraphs, are short. Quite long ones, of 8 lines or more, are not however unusual (see FH Chapters 1, 2, 17, 36 and 41. M. Chapters 13, 14, 15, 40, 43, 51 and DD Chapters 10, 18, 26, 37, 44 and 49).

It would be absurd to claim any of this as notable poetry. It is interesting rather as an indication of what George Eliot thought poetry should be. She liked dramatic dialogue (and monologue) and there is a good deal of pastiche sixteenth century drama; of which the following, with its tendency to the moral maxim, is characteristic:-

M. It was but yesterday you spoke him well-
 You've changed your mind so soon? Not I - 'tis he

N. That, changing to my thought, has changed my mind.
 No man puts rotten apples in his pouch.
 Because their upper side looked fair to him.
 Constancy in mistake is constant folly (FH 7)

There is also a certain amount of "Jacobean" blank verse and what might be termed Miltonic versifying. Indeed, one forms the impression that, in addition to their primary adverting purpose, composing these epigraphs was a kind of game for their author. They offered the same sort of intellectual challenge that competition-setters provide at the back of the "intellectual" weeklies. The epigraph to M 43 is in the Browning mode, whilst four chapters later it seems unmistakably Blakean. One chapter after that, M. 48, provides some pastiche Shelley. Chapter 51 epigraph reminds us - not too accurately! - of eighteenth century couplets. It is impossible to believe George Eliot didn't enjoy trying her hand at these imitations.

Many of her epigraphs can be read with admiration for their aptness, their content and the adroit way they are turned; in others the weight of the thought presses too hard on the fragile verse form containing it, like a schoolboy in outgrown clothes. Occasionally, George Eliot's search for a telling image discovers only the ludicrous, as here:-

Oh sir, the loftiest hopes on earth
 Draw lots with meaner hopes : heroic breasts,
 Breathing bad air, run risk of pestilence;
 Or, lacking lime-juice when they cross the line
 May languish with the scurvy. (M 16)

In addition to the favourite dramatic forms (1st and 2nd Gentlemen make frequent appearances) there is a surprising variety of other poetic forms. These range from a triolet, four-lined hymn stanzas, blank verse in varying styles and couplets, to the single sonnet.

Turning to George Eliot's choice of verse from other poets to serve as epigraph one is at once struck by the width of her reading. Chaucer and Shakespeare, of course, but also Beaumont and Fletcher, Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Daniel and Spenser. From the seventeenth century Donne, Sedley, Wotton and Milton. From the eighteenth century rather less, as one would expect from a mid-Victorian sensibility, but Blake, Johnson and Goldsmith are quoted. From her own century there is scarcely an important poet omitted : Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley (Lamb and Southey, but prose citations) Tennyson, both Brownings, Rossetti and Walt Whitman. Considering that George

Eliot died in 1880 what significant name from her own lifetime could be added to the list - with the very interesting exception of Mathew Arnold? Mention should certainly be made of the foreign poets she quotes, sometimes in the original. They include Theocritus, Sophocles and Aeschylus, La Fontaine, Goethe, Dante, Heine and De Musset: George Eliot's enormous width of English culture, and her wide-ranging acquaintance with other European cultures (not to mention Jewish culture) as these are evidenced in her epigraphs, serve to remind us of the extraordinary quality of mind brought to bear on her fiction.

There is no need to add unduly to this short note by examining in similar detail the prose epigraphs. The same width of reading, the same judgment and powers of recall are evident. They range, one can say, from A (the Apocrypha) to Z (Zunz, a 19th Century German Jewish historian) and they draw upon most of the major English prose writers. Burton (of the Anatomy of Melancholy) is there, as is Sir Thomas Browne and Fuller. Quotations come from Spanish, French, Italian and German authors - often in the original.

George Eliot's own prose epigraphs characteristically tend towards the moralising aphorism. They illustrate her fondness for constating general truths derived from common experience. Sometimes they give one the sense of being paragraphs from another book. Her inclination towards rather ponderous pastiche of seventeenth century prose is evident. What may well strike the reader most, however, is the manner in which, in Daniel Deronda the epigraphs begin to expand into miniature essays e.g. DD 21. At the same time they sometimes become syntactically obscure and hard to understand. It is difficult, for instance, to imagine the kind of reader who would delay pressing on with the story to wrestle with DD 32. They seem to me, rather, to indicate the sombre didacticism which increasingly dominated George Eliot at the time. But this is perhaps to show ill-judgment in reading outwardly from the book, and into the author's life. She was far from being only or always the teacher. Let her have the last word. It is the final epigraph in Daniel Deronda

In the chequered area of human experience the seasons are all mingled as in the golden age: fruit and blossom hang together; in the same moment the sickle is reaping and the seed is sprinkled; one tends the green cluster and another treads the wine-press. Nay, in each of our lives harvest and spring-time are continually one, until Death himself gathers us and sows us anew in his invisible fields.