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Oliver Lovesey

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Timothy Hands

THE CLERICAL CHARACTER IN GEORGE ELIOT'S FICTION

by Oliver Lovesey

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Writing to Blackwood in November 1856 to introduce *Scenes of Clerical Life*, G.H. Lewes promised,

tales and sketches illustrative of the actual life of our country clergy about a quarter of a century ago; but solely in its 'human' and 'not at all' in its 'theological' aspect; the object being to do what has never yet been done in our Literature, for we have abundant religious stories polemical and doctrinal, but since the *Vicar* and Miss Austen, no stories representing the clergy like any other class with the humours, sorrows, and troubles of other men.

Oliver Lovesey's new study is an overdue attempt to examine the value of Lewes's claim, placing Eliot's presentation of the clergy in the context of contemporary social history and prevalent literary practice, whilst also throwing in some examination of fictional theory as a sop to those not content with the works of Eliot per se.

Chapters are devoted to single novels, or pairs of them, roughly in chronological sequence. *Scenes* is presented first as 'a complete clerical world and an anatomy of the clerical character'. More specifically, *Bede* and *Marnet* present contrasts between Established and Dissenting religions, country and town, and progress and conservatism in which parsons such as Irwine and Crackenthorpe are used to represent the preservations of cultural and religious traditions. Chapter 3, split into two parts, examines a traditional Anglican parson (Kenn), a historical Roman Catholic priest (Savonarola), and a Dissenting minister (Lyon), and finds a common theme in this diversity. In novels which focus on conflicts between egotism and altruism, personal desires and societal restraints, all three men of God find that their identity prevents them in some crucial way from being men of the community - perhaps even of themselves. *Middlemarch*, the subject of chapter 4, reflects the crisis of professionalism in the nineteenth century church - a crisis also reflected in the novels of Oliphant, Trollope and Hardy. Eliot's conclusion, as Lovesey perhaps a mite too easily sees it, is that 'The parson's sympathetic understanding of others and his function as a stabilizing influence in the parish, and not any spiritual duties of the clerical office ... must be preserved in English society' (84). Where *Middlemarch* examines the role of the professional cleric, *Deronda*, the subject of the final chapter, examines the natural priest, a conception which Eliot brings to its summation in the presentation of Daniel. The mythic idealistic pattern of *Deronda*'s characterization, Lovesey argues, 'necessitates the narrator's conducting and mediating presence', preparing the reader for 'a widening of social and moral horizons at the novel's close' (113).

This is a thorough and valuable, if also occasionally slightly bland and cautious, study. The style owes much to graduate style sheets (as might be expected in an adapted thesis), and the manner is cautious and deferential, not least in the old worldly way in which clergymen are frequently (and not always correctly) referred to by title. Background reading has been wide and is well handled, and the novels are thoroughly known and adeptly referred to and analysed. The topic (religious) and approach (character based) are traditional, and there is sometimes a hint that the author feels almost embarrassed about this - embarrassed enough to add passages of fictional theory which sometimes tend to divert from the topic rather than illuminate it.

This is monograph rather than book, and it is therefore praise rather than criticism to conclude that the work leaves the reader eager for more, perhaps involving the poems as well as the novels, and even venturing into Eliot's biography as well as into her reading. The book fills, very admirably, a hole, but the whole is rather bigger than the present filling. Now that he is established as the authority in this field, Professor Lovesey can be encouraged to return to it with confidence and at length.

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