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NOTE

The Egyptian Sorcerer's Drop of Ink in *Adam Bede*

By Tapan Kumar Mukherjee

With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen, I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder, in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799.

Many scholars and critics have discussed the symbolic significance of the famous opening sentence of *Adam Bede* and related it to George Eliot's own narrative method, but the precise workings of the Egyptian sorcerer's magical exercise in divination have received little attention. As Joseph Wiesenfarth pointed out in his introduction to *George Eliot: A Writer's Notebook 1854-1879* (1981), the opening sentence is clearly derived from her reading of a contemporary work on modern Egypt (p. xxiii), Edward William Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (London: Charles Knight, 1836). Wiesenfarth refers only to one sentence in Lane, which makes the connection between ink-drop and mirror, but reading more widely in Lane's *Account*, particularly chapters 10, 11 and 12, furnishes us with a fuller description of the magician's procedure (a 1908 edition by J. M. Dent can be consulted on the internet). The sorcerer uses a child's palm for conjuring up the past since the infant mind is taken to be pristine, a *tabula rasa* unmarked by experience and thus capable of acting as an unblemished mirror of past events. He first writes some magical signs and symbols in the palm and then a drop of ink is poured into it. The magician asks the child what he sees in the drop of ink. The child says that he sees a sweeping broom, which means that the blurred vision of the present is being cleared away to enable the child to look into the past. Then the child is hypnotised and in this hypnotic state, with his mind completely under the control of the sorcerer, he sees visions of the past in the inky palm and is able to answer questions about the past with a spectacular degree of accuracy and certainty. The child's role resembles that of the Roman or Egyptian priest who answers any question put to him by means of ventriloquism. The above short exposition may help to clarify the key concept enshrined in the opening sentence of the novel.