

Forum

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Class Ideology in *Middlemarch*

TO THE EDITOR:

In his illuminating article "Is *Middlemarch* Ahistorical?" Henry Staten understates the complexity of Lydgate's position by not heeding the British medical hierarchy of the period (115 [2000]: 991-1005).

True, Lydgate cherishes an aristocratic class ideology derived from his connection to the Lydgates of Northumberland—a connection, incidentally, of decisive importance to that social climber Rosamond. But to speak repeatedly and simply, as Staten does, of Lydgate's "descent into the lower reaches of the medical profession" is to underestimate both the implications of his education and knowledge and the shifting structure of medicine in Britain at the time of the First Reform Bill (1002; see also 1001).

Lydgate is a surgeon, a member of the middle rank of medical men, above the apothecary, a tradesman, and below the physician, a gentleman who has graduated from Oxford or Cambridge, commands classical learning, is a good conversationalist, and traditionally attended the upper classes, charging relatively high honoraria. However, Lydgate stands far above the ordinary surgeon not only in his social origins but, more important, in his training and expertise. Apart from the conventional apprenticeship, he was educated at the leading medical schools in London, Edinburgh, and notably Paris, then the center of the most advanced medical research. Several eminent scientists, such as Bichat and Raspail, are mentioned as having made a deep impression on Lydgate. From Paris he brought back a stethoscope, an instrument newly devised by Laënnec in 1819 and used by Lydgate to diagnose Casaubon's heart disease. His correct diagnoses of Casaubon, Fred Vincy, and Nancy Nash as well as his avant-garde treatment of Trumbull's pneumonia and Raffles's alcoholism show his vast superiority to his fellow surgeons in *Middlemarch*. Indeed, he alienates the graduated physicians by his demonstrated expertise. He also transgresses professional codes by refusing to dispense drugs (a manual task proper for surgeons but not for physicians) and by treating internal diseases that were considered beyond the

competence of surgeons. As successors to the barber-surgeons of previous centuries, surgeons were still limited at that time to treating ills on the body's surface. Finally, Lydgate aspires to pursue cell research alongside his practice, a goal that also raises him well above the lower ranks of the medical profession.

Ironically, Lydgate is undone at least as much by his overreaching professional ambition as by his class ideology. Staten asserts that Lydgate "has come unglued from [the] material conditions of possibility" of his class ideology (1001). I would argue that he comes unglued from the material conditions of possibility of his profession. His fate illustrates how the dynamism of the emergent class of family practitioners was thwarted in a stagnant sociocultural situation.

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Reply:

Lilian R. Furst accurately reconstructs "the complexity of Lydgate's position." George Eliot depicted in precise detail the conflict of the English medical profession as entrenched at that historical moment with the newer, more scientific medicine emanating from the Continent—as well as the matrix of social and economic relations within which this conflict is realized in Lydgate's intrusion into Middlemarch. In fact, it was the scope and detail of this depiction, to which Furst calls attention, that first started me thinking of the historicity of *Middlemarch* in Lukácsian terms.

However, none of the complexity adduced by Furst bears on the argument I make—on the contrary, it is precisely the evidentness of Lydgate's superiority in "training and expertise" on the most manifest level of the text that seems in the past to have obscured, and apparently continues to obscure, the sociopolitical aspect of his situation on which I focus my article. Furst reiterates the facts about Lydgate that have always been most impressive to critics and that have led them to be rather easier on him (commonly treating his case as the more or less *tragic* downfall of a superior man, a reading hinted at by Furst's reference to the "overreaching professional ambition" by which he is undone) than I have been. This fairly standard view of Lydgate in fact reflects his own self-evaluation, the sense of himself as not only socially but objectively the superior of his fellow practitioners that

screens from his consciousness the degree to which he is the creature of a hollow class ideology. The people of Middlemarch, who in my view are never fundamentally wrong in their instincts about the major characters (a fact that Eliot's ironic or comic rendering of the populace might conceal from the reader predisposed to sympathy with Lydgate), are a reliable index of *something wrong* with Lydgate at the most concrete ethico-political level. This something wrong seems to me as manifest in the narrative, and with as much irony as Eliot musters anywhere ("Lydgate was particular about his boots"), as is his objective superiority; yet the significance of the narrator's critique of him has been strangely underplayed by critics—as it is again by Furst.

On reflection I will stand by the phrase "descent into the lower reaches of the medical profession." By the phrase "lower reaches" I meant to evoke Lydgate's economic difficulties (another variable in the "rank" equation; Lydgate's practice brings in only half of what it did for his predecessor) quite as much as the fact that he does not belong to the officially highest rank, that of the physicians. But the latter fact justifies the phrase "lower ranks" as well, because, as Furst notes, the physician was "a gentleman" who "traditionally attended the upper classes," and, given Lydgate's origins and pretensions, anything lower than such a rank makes him *déclassé*.

Social rank is not something intrinsic; it is bestowed by the community and need have nothing to do with intrinsic merit. (Interestingly, Furst seems to accord greater recognition to the pretensions of this poor relative of a baronet than do the people of Middlemarch, Rosamond aside, who are inclined to doubt that his "social origins" place Lydgate "far above" others of his professional rank.) Nor need intrinsic merit seek recognition in the form of social rank (cf. Felix Holt). But Lydgate wants to have it all: moral and intellectual integrity and ascendancy on the one hand and on the other a social standing and material well-being that in his thoughtless reproduction of a class ideology seem indissociable from his intellectual superiority. Nothing about his "overreaching professional ambition" would have undone him in isolation from the bankruptcy to which his own class-determined tastes, including his taste for Rosamond, lead him in the end.

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