

## Images of physicians in literature: from quacks to heroes

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Such was Lydgate's plan of his future: to do good small work for Middlemarch, and great work for the world.<sup>1</sup>

Images of healers have long been a popular subject in the field of literature and medicine.<sup>2-5</sup> The practitioner most often studied has been the physician—usually a white man, although the spectrum of healers examined has broadened to include women (particularly nurses<sup>6</sup>), people of colour, and non-traditional healers.<sup>7</sup> Writers have found the life of the physician a compelling subject “because they could not be indifferent to it. The physician is too intimately bound to hopes and fears of the ill in their struggle against disease and death”.<sup>8</sup> Readers, especially physician readers, have also found the doctor an intriguing subject of wide cultural appeal: “These images of physicians pervade our culture; they reveal not only how the patient sees the doctor, but, even more significantly, how the doctor sees himself or herself and what behavior fits with that self-perception”.<sup>9</sup> Such images, and the behaviour that accompanies them, have been far from static.

In ancient writings the image of physicians was captured in two ways: healer-gods had supernatural power and were revered, as in the mythological figures of Apollo and Aesculapius; and human healers were often bitterly satirised.<sup>10,11</sup> The satirical image (eg, figure 1) quickly became the dominant one, with the doctor portrayed mainly in the “comic tradition of stupid, greedy physician-quacks”.<sup>10</sup> Chaucer's avaricious “doctour of phisik”, in the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, is said to have “lovede gold in special”, a character trait unfortunately befitting one whose “studie was but litel on the Bible”.<sup>12</sup>

Physicians appear in the works of Shakespeare, but they are marginal figures, who are limited in what they can do.<sup>13</sup> In the 17th-century plays of Molière, the comic rendering of the physician reaches its zenith, with the playwright skewering both the profession and its

practitioners in many of his works. For example, the protagonist of *The Imaginary Invalid*, Argan, is attended by a gaggle of quacks, all attempting to deal with Argan's hypochondriacal ailments through aggressive and reckless interference.<sup>14</sup> Argan's brother, Béralde, finally observes, “almost all men die of their remedies, and not of their diseases”.<sup>15</sup>

This image of the bungling doctor as buffoon began to dissipate as medicine's scientific development accelerated in the 19th century.<sup>16</sup> With George Eliot's description of Mr Tertius Lydgate in her masterly 1872 novel *Middlemarch*, the image of the physician took a definitive turn from a stock, comic character to the physician as hero (figure 2). It is, of course, no accident that the

emergence of the heroic physician had to await the ascendancy of the scientific enterprise in medicine.<sup>10</sup> The physician is also taken seriously by other contemporaries of Eliot, including Flaubert, Ibsen, and Zola.

*Middlemarch* is worthy of close attention for various reasons. The novel is an important mirror of changes in medical epistemology and practice in the early 19th century. Although the work was published in 1871–74, it is set in 1829. Eliot, by referring to several of the technological advances then being put into

place, creates a remarkable compendium of changes in medical practice in this period. The Middlemarch newcomer Lydgate, in contrast to the village's older doctors, is closely identified with recent innovations. He uses the stethoscope, for example, the novelty of which is reinforced by the narrator's comment that its use is not yet “a matter of course”. He is not keen on the entrenched practices of strengthening and lowering treatments, preferring instead expectant therapy and the healing power of nature. This bent causes Middlemarchers to be uneasy about whether he will do anything when called to attend the sick. Their wariness reflects a long cultural tradition in which medicine's standing as a profession was intimately connected to the physician's active intervention.

From the standpoint of the history of medicine alone, the novel is important in its tracking of sea changes in medicine, especially in its emphasis on anatomy,

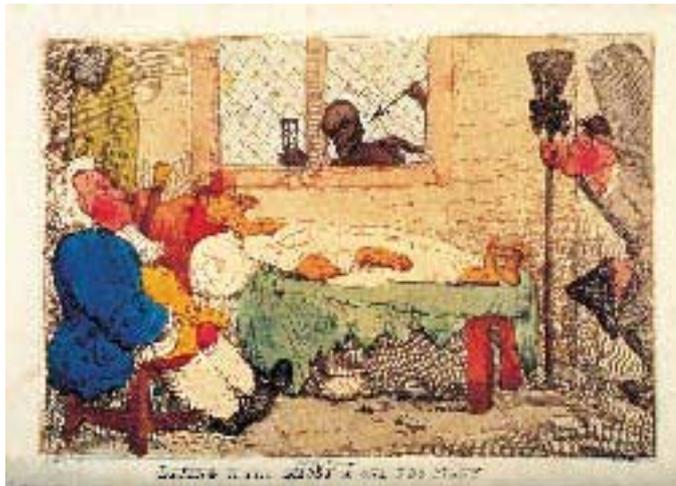


Figure 1: A physician by his patient's death-bed, represented with a skeletal death figure at the window and an undertaker's assistant arriving with a coffin

The caption below the doctor says “I purge, I bleed, I sweat ‘em, then if they die I lets ‘em. Rowlandson (coloured etching after R Newton) 1813?”

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pathology—"a fine America for a spirited young adventurer"—and the fundamental organisation of tissues. Lydgate is "ambitious above all to contribute towards enlarging the scientific, rational basis" of medicine, specifically in outdoing Bichat in discovering "certain primary webs", or the "primitive tissue". Eliot deftly weaves the anatomical idea into the novel, using the web as a motif throughout to reflect not only Lydgate's professional interests, but also his increasing personal entanglements.

Eliot's Lydgate is a fully realised, complex character who combines intellectual vigour and a moral consciousness.<sup>17</sup> Everything about him suggests that he will be a man worth watching. He has had stellar medical training in London, Edinburgh, and Paris. In France, he knew and was influenced by members of the Paris Clinical School,<sup>18</sup> including Pierre Louis. He is intensely interested in reform of the profession and increasing the stature of hospitals and medical schools. Some of his ideas—for example, accepting the patient "as a partner in his own cure"—are strikingly contemporary. Like other physicians in the heroic tradition, he is talented, competent, and ambitious, and he feels that medicine is a special calling.<sup>10</sup>

As the novel unfolds, however, Lydgate's dreams are slowly eroded, largely because of small, seemingly unimportant choices he makes in his daily interaction with people. He soon discovers that it is not enough to have good medical training and lofty ambitions; rather, a person's character and judgment may have the biggest roles in the making—and undoing—of his professional life. Instead of a "great work", Lydgate's contribution to the world turns out to be a treatise on gout, and he "always regarded himself as a failure: he had not done what he once meant to do". Thus, this physician finally serves best as a "cautionary figure".<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the greatest importance of the novel lies not in its reflection of the history of medicine, admirable though it is, but in its ability to serve as a tool for moral reflection. The deepest value of Eliot's portrayal of Mr Lydgate lies in her presentation of the physician in the rich context of an individual life. Here, the physician of the realist tradition, unlike the satirist's easier target, takes on added dimensions that show the complexities of moral choice in private and public life.

The task of the mimetic novelist is a daunting one. In *Middlemarch* Eliot has created a believable world not only through the presentation of realistic moral choices and their consequences, but also through a stunning attention to historical detail. Her *Quarry for "Middlemarch"*, a notebook in which she planned the work, shows the care she took to ensure accurate, current background for the social and medical world of the novel. Extensive reading-

notes show her reliance on *The Lancet* in particular, a connection made explicit in the novel. For example, during an early event in which Lydgate's character and independence first come under fire, Lydgate is cautioned against becoming "one of the 'Lancet's' men", who were then agitating, under Thomas Wakley's editorial leadership, to remove the position of coroner from the legal profession and to place it in medical hands. Another detractor concedes, however, that "Wakley is right sometimes". Eliot's appropriation of the controversies of the day gives the novel the same sort of liveliness that then abounded—a tradition that seems alive and well today—in the medical journal that constituted her main source. The work's abundance of detail is one of the

qualities that make *Middlemarch* a centrepiece of the high realist tradition so closely identified with the development of the 19th-century novel. It is unique in its combination of a minutely realised, particular world and the expansiveness of its enduring concerns.

In the same way that a new world is opened to Lydgate when he turns to an encyclopaedia entry on the valves of the heart, readers of *Middlemarch* can have an engaging new world opened to them. Eliot's created world is not only a microcosm of medicine that can be validated by reference to historical sources but also a realm painted on a larger canvas—the communal and moral life of particular characters in specific circumstances that are fully, sometimes painfully, realised. The world of this novel is one that mirrors the nuances and intricacies of life; it shows its "thickly textured quality without recourse to formulaic simplifications".<sup>20</sup> But because the life depicted there is not our

life, we readers may pay closer attention to the story and its lessons. The sense of familiarity that may occasionally make us oblivious to our own "spots of commonness" is missing. We have not encountered everything that happens in *Middlemarch*. In fact, we need the novel precisely because we are slightly removed from it: "Our experience is, without fiction, too confined and too parochial. Literature extends it, making us reflect and feel about what might otherwise be too distant for feeling".<sup>21</sup> Yet Eliot's world is also one that we know intimately: many of the dilemmas faced there have, in some way, been our dilemmas. What is "too distant" may be paradoxically close.

This, then, is the special value of literary images of physicians: such depictions may provide models, of one kind or another, for thoughtful readers. The physician may ultimately be a character we want to emulate in some fashion; perhaps something in his story renews for us a once-firm conviction, restores a faded personal ideal. Alternatively, the image of the physician may be a warning, with an insistence on the inextricable links



Figure 2: Mr Tertius Lydgate as portrayed by Douglas Hodge in the BBC's television production of *Middlemarch*

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between doing and being, between the private person and the professional role. As in the cautionary tale spun in *Middlemarch*, the fictional doctor may show us what we may become if we are not careful. Amidst the complexities that seem to characterise medical practice in the late 20th century—or, for that matter, in the tumultuous 19th century or perhaps any century—it is good to be reminded of the enduring value of literature. Just as medicine calls young Mr Lydgate, his creator calls us to our best, most noble selves.

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## Department of poetry

## Omen

If palms tell fortunes,  
 There in splayed backs of hands  
 Pasts are betrayed.  
 Look carefully  
 At what is ebbing  
 Underneath the cirrus skin.  
 Hold up both hands  
 Observe the clue to  
 What is growing  
 Deep beneath  
 Fine see-through paper covering.  
 Fingers straightened, mould the skin  
 To Lilliputian sand ripples.  
 Curved to claws, reveal vein networks  
 Unsuspected, lying loose,  
 Close under silky sickening.

*Helen Rosenthal*

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Vista

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