Public Houses:
Unstable Language in Dangerous Places

‘The Wager, A New Song’

‘Tother night, ‘twas Saturday last
Released from the plague of the Shop
All Labour and care being past
Away bounded I like a Top
To enjoy a cool Tankard and Pipe
And Feast on Society’s charms
At the House of a Jolly good wight
And y-cleped the Newdigate Arms.

A few chosen spirits I found
The juice of John Barleycorn quaffing
And the glass and the Joke went round
‘Midst laughter and smoking and chaffing
At length of a sudden there rose
A riot of Tongues like a Babel
As to which of the present gay Beaus
To eat their raw meat was best able.

‘Occurences at Nuneaton’ 1826

Because Mary Ann Evans wrote the earliest letters in Gordon S. Haight’s collection in the mid-1830s, we know very little about her life between 1828 and 1833, the years that form her favorite temporal setting in her Midlands fiction. Apart from Robert
Evans's terse diary, the major document providing details of the area's daily life during this period is 'Memorandum Occurences at Nuneaton' (sic), a chronicle of local events between 1810 and 1845 said to be written by John Astly. In contrast to surviving portrayals of Nuneaton by Mary Ann Evans and her father in fiction and journal, the Diary describes activities such as boxing matches, balloon ascents, and hangings, events perhaps too vulgar for the attention of a seriously Evangelical young person or the notations of an estate agent with heavy responsibilities and a need for maintaining careful records and unassailable authority.

At the same time, George Eliot in her fiction and the Diarist in his journal assign public houses a prominent place in their descriptions of Warwickshire. While the Diarist notes many business transactions involving public houses and expresses opinions regarding related commercial, moral, and political issues, George Eliot mentions numerous drinking places in her fiction, even when she sets little action there. In most of her stories, the drinking places bear names drawn from common Warwickshire signs which she carefully suits to the events that occur in these settings and to the characters who frequent them. George Eliot's choices for their names usually call attention to a variety of relationships characterized by instabilities in the political, financial, and familial relationships of her characters, instabilities that help create the Condition of England.

The public houses themselves often accommodate scenes in which sons and daughters deal with their parents' irresponsibility either effectively or inadequately. Most of the irresponsible parent characters have habits which must be redeemed by the acts of conscientious children or by substitute parents who assume the duties abandoned by delinquent fathers or mothers. Adam Bede, often criticized as excessively idealized, reveals his major fault, a priggish streak similar to Felix Holt's, in his interactions with his irresponsible father.

Adam's change from judgmental to sympathetic becomes more dramatic when viewed in terms of his father's drinking habits and