

George Eliot's Jewish Feminist

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In assessing the dual plot of *Daniel Deronda* which juxtaposes Gentile British society with cosmopolitan European and English Jewry, critics have found it easy to agree that, as Barbara Hardy succinctly puts it, "The English are in varying degrees the objects of satire, and the Europeans, especially the Jew, are, also in varying degrees, the objects of praise."¹ Nor is there any lack of critical consensus that the Jewish part of the novel, however virtuously intended—indeed, it is generally held, because of that very intention—is artistically inferior to the English part. In Henry James' famous review *Constans* objects, "All the Jewish part is at bottom cold,"² and F.R. Leavis deplores the same unsatisfactory result while suggesting, however, that the problem is just the reverse—that the Jewish part suffers from an excess of emotional involvement by the author, from "emotional...immaturity," from its not being sufficiently under her control.³ Yet whether because of too little or too much emotion, the aesthetic inferiority of the Jewish part is a commonplace of critical judgment.

Still, when all this is said and accepted, the correlative view that the "portrayal of Jewish society is almost entirely approving"⁴ remains something of an oversimplification. Without wishing to deny the rather bloodless idealizations of Daniel, Mordecai and Mirah, and the more glamorous one of Klesmer, I shall nevertheless want to argue that in other instances

George Eliot's attitude toward her Jewish material is more complex than has generally been allowed. It is, variously, more accepting of well-worn Jewish stereotypes and also more problematic. Barbara Hardy, while acknowledging, "There are imperfect Jews in *Daniel Deronda*," nonetheless continues, "Lapidoth, Mirah's father, is one, and a splendid creation he is. But there are far more imperfect Gentiles."⁵ This is questionable. More to the point, however, is that what is striking about all but one of the novel's "imperfect Jews" is not their imperfection but their predictability, the way in which their unattractive qualities are automatically presented as having a peculiarly Jewish flavor, as conforming to established negative Jewish *types*. Lapidoth is probably the best instance of this. He has underhandedly contrived, for his own financial gain, to sell his daughter into concubinage with some foreign count, a situation considerably more loathsome than any of the marriages for social or financial gain urged on their daughters by the Gentile English families, with which Lapidoth's intentions are sometimes too readily equated. No Christian parent in the novel reveals such crude greed or behaves as odiously toward an offspring as he; even the despicable Grandcourt shows more solicitude toward his children. Finally, it is only because Lapidoth's uncontrollably thieving (perhaps stereotypically Jewish?) fingers cannot resist the temptation to pocket Deronda's ring that he opportunely disappears from the scene. Whereas Grandcourt is one of the

most original villains in English literature, of whom we are told that to know him “was to doubt what he would do in any particular case,”⁶ Lapidoth is a predictable Jewish Villain, albeit a comic one.⁷

Less morally repugnant, but no less stereotyped in their unattractiveness are the pawn broker Ezra Cohen and his son. While we are ultimately supposed to admire Ezra’s domestic and religious devotion, his good-heartedness and business integrity, he exudes the vulgar self-satisfaction and attachment to money which are so predictably regarded as “characteristically Jewish” traits. He is no worse, to be sure, than the satirized English—the Gascoignes, Mr. Bult, the Arrowpoints—but where their satiric portrayals show wit and originality, Ezra Cohen is an identifiable Jewish stereotype who never surprises, but only confirms:

I wouldn’t exchange my business with any in the world. There’s none more honourable, nor more charitable, nor more necessary for all classes I like my business, I like my street, and I like my shop. I wouldn’t have it a door further down. And I wouldn’t be without a pawnshop, sir, to be the Lord Mayor.... I say it’s like the Government revenue—it embraces the brass as well as the gold of the country. And a man who doesn’t get money, sir, can’t accommodate. (p. 442)

Ezra’s young son Jacob, on first meeting Deronda, is instinctively ready to swap pocket knives: “‘Have you got a knife?’ says Jacob, coming closer. His small voice was hoarse in its glibness, as if it belonged to an aged commercial soul, fatigued with bargaining through many generations.” (p. 441)

More fundamental, however, in making George Eliot’s treatment of Jewish life less wholly approving than is generally assumed, and was consciously intended, is the awareness

she shows of the position of women in Jewish culture and tradition—an awareness that is sharply questioning, if not actually critical. For in the character of the hero’s mother, who conforms to no established stereotype, George Eliot has created an original, uncharacteristic, independent, talented, angry, “unfeminine,” “modern” woman, who is in rebellion against the constraints imposed on her by traditional Judaism and the role it allots to women; and while she is by no means held up as a model, her undeniable charisma and eloquence help to make the traditional “feminine” submissive virtues of the apparently idealized Jewish heroine, Mirah, appear questionable indeed.

Deronda’s mother, the Princess Halm-Eberstein, formerly a supremely talented and internationally famous singer-actress, though she appears in only two late chapters, seems to me one of the most interesting characters in the novel and in George Eliot’s fiction as a whole. George Eliot’s gallery of female characters throughout her earlier novels contains a number of young women of exceptional sensibility; but none, with the exception of Dinah Morris (in *Adam Bede*), seems to have any particular talent for a specific vocation, and Dinah’s charismatic preaching is abruptly cut short by the new Methodist policy prohibiting women preachers. When these young women, such as Dinah or Dorothea Brooke (of *Middlemarch*), grow past early womanhood (as, for example, Maggie Tulliver in *Mill on the Floss* does not), we are asked to accept that they find a qualified fulfilment of their exceptional natures through a happy marriage and motherhood. Deronda’s mother is distinguished, first, by being George Eliot’s only exceptional female character who has a concrete vocation at which she excels and which she pursues into adulthood. She is, in short, this great woman novelist’s only major successful “career woman,” as well as her only major woman artist. (Lydgate’s first love in *Middlemarch* is an interesting early prototype, though more suggested than developed.) She is also

George Eliot's only portrait of a feminist figure. Though we meet her after her life as a great singer-actress is over, she is presented as having been a truly great artist, who placed her artistic vocation before all else. To be free to pursue her calling in the face of her father's disapproval, she married her weak, adoring cousin, though she had not wanted to marry at all. After his death, to devote herself more freely to her career and to liberate her son from what she considered the bondage of his Jewish identity, she arranged for Daniel to be raised by an English baronet, in ignorance of his true parentage. She married again (thus acquiring her title) only after she feared her voice had begun to go bad and her career as an artist had come to an end.

Deronda's mother is a foil to Gwendolen Harleth, the heroine of the "English half" of the novel, as well as to the virtuous Jews, Mirah and Daniel. Gwendolen is a fallible, though potentially redeemable, representative of the morally corrupt, narrow, philistine, English Victorian society, which is juxtaposed with the artistically—particularly musically—rich, intellectually broad, cosmopolitan Jewish world of the novel. Gwendolen, we are early told, "Having always been the pet and pride of the household, waited on by mother, sisters, governess, and maids, as if she had been a princess in exile... naturally found it difficult to think her own pleasure less important than others made it..." (p. 53) And the refrain of Gwendolen as princess in exile is sounded several times—for example, "Always she was the princess in exile, who in time of famine was to have her breakfast-roll made of the finest-bolted flour from the seven thin ears of wheat, and in a general decampment was to have her silver fork kept out of the baggage." (p. 71) With a society girl's ability to sing a little and participate in a *tableau vivant* because of her good looks, Gwendolen, when fallen on hard times, fancies she might instantly make a living as an actress, only to be bitterly humiliated by the unbiased judgment of the greatly gifted (Jewish) musician, Klesmer. Gwendolen has neither the

talent nor the training of an artist; nor has she the discipline or temperament necessary to acquire such training. A princess in exile only by virtue of her own and her family's sense of her entitlement, she might even be said to conform to the popular current stereotype of the Jewish Princess, to whom somehow all shall be given and from whom nothing asked. However, Gwendolen stands in sharp contrast here to the real Jewish princess, the Princess Halm-Eberstein, who has willingly sought to sacrifice her life to her art. Gwendolen is also contrasted to Mirah who similarly recognizes art as a disciplined and serious calling.

Like Gwendolen, however, Deronda's mother married for freedom, never an admirable motive for George Eliot who felt that virtue consists rather in responding to the duties life confronts us with. And yet her quest for freedom appears less reprehensible than Gwendolen's, because although she sought freedom from the bondage of being a Jewish woman, an impulse George Eliot could hardly endorse, she also sought freedom to pursue the larger life of art, an expansive, non-egoistic motive which we are encouraged, at least to some extent, to admire. In the presentation of Daniel's mother, as so often in George Eliot, the language is revealing. According to her father, the Princess Halm-Eberstein tells Daniel, "I was to care forever about what Israel had been; and I did not care at all. I cared for the wide world, and all that I could represent in it.... I wanted to live a large life...and be carried along in a great current...." (p. 693) The words "wide" and "large" are key positive terms for George Eliot, and like them "currents" are almost always good; to be carried along in a current often symbolizes the praiseworthy submergence of self in some higher, wider identity.

The virtuous Daniel, for example, who is finally blest by having "the very best of human possibilities...befall him—the blending of a complete personal love in one current with a larger duty" (p. 685), has been repeatedly characterized

by his “yearning after wide knowledge” (p. 217) and his gratitude for having had “as wide an instruction and sympathy as possible” (p. 725). The prophet Mordecai’s visionary imagination is objectified by his love for “far-stretching scene[s]; his thought went on in wide spaces; and whenever he could, he tried to have in reality the influences of a large sky.” (p. 530) By contrast, Gwendolen’s narrow egoism is symbolized by her fear of wide spaces. “Solitude in any wide scene impressed her with an undefinable feeling of immeasurable existence aloof from her, in the midst of which she was incapable of asserting herself.” (pp. 94-95) And her narrow horizons are contrasted explicitly with the wide horizon of the world of art, in which she dabbles only as a subamateur; when she is rebuffed for her singing at a social evening by the great musician Klesmer, she experiences “a sinking of heart at the sudden width of horizon opened round her small musical performance.” (p. 79)

Thus it is too simple to dismiss the princess as selfish, though she is this too, in some sense, and it is too simple to dismiss her as the character “who most clearly articulates the position of the assimilationist,”⁸ though she does do this as well. The more striking point about her, it seems to me, is that all that Daniel finds by embracing Judaism—large horizons, wide vistas, submergence in an existence greater than himself—his mother could find only by rejecting Judaism (“I cared for the wide world.... I wanted to live a large life”). The aspirations of mother and son are remarkably similar. Yet the fate of Deronda’s mother serves to illustrate—whether intentionally or not—how very different are the roles, status and options which Judaism offered to men and women. Speaking of her father, the princess tells Deronda:

I was to be what he called “the Jewish woman” under pain of his curse. I was to feel everything I did not feel, and believe everything I did not believe. I was to feel awe for the bit of parchment in the *mezuza*

over the door; to dread lest a bit of butter should touch a bit of meat; to think it beautiful that men should bind the *tephillin* on them, and women not.... You are not a woman. You may try—but you can never imagine what it is to have a man’s force of genius in you, and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl. To have a pattern cut out—“this is the Jewish woman; this is what you must be; this is what you are wanted for; a woman’s heart must be of such a size and no larger, else it must be pressed small, like Chinese feet; her happiness is to be made as cakes are, by a fixed receipt.” That was what my father wanted. He wished I had been a son; he cared for me as a makeshift link. (pp. 692-693, 694)

What the princess has rejected is not so much Judaism *per se* as the traditional role of the Jewish woman. Moreover, in not wanting to have her “heart...pressed small, like Chinese feet,” the princess presents herself as a contrast to Mirah as well as Gwendolen; for Mirah, embodying an ideal of dutiful, unassertive—almost Dickensian—female virtue, is characterized not only by her “small” voice, but also by feet so small that even in the compact, doll’s house-like abode of the diminutive Meyrick women, “there were no shoes in the house small enough for Mirah.” (p. 249)

In her speeches to Daniel the princess’s passionate rage and hurt at the subordinate, constricting role allotted her as the Jewish woman seem scarcely to have abated through all the intervening years of artistic and social triumphs: “My father had tyrannised over me—he cared more about a grandson to come than he did about me: I counted as nothing. You were to be such a Jew as he; you were to be what he wanted.” (p. 698) While she seems perplexed that the Jewish identity which was bondage to her, and from which she therefore thought to save her son, should come instead as liberation to him, this difference is entirely in keeping with her

own account of the different roles offered to men and women by the religion she has rejected. Showing Daniel a protrait of herself in her youth she asks,

Had I not a rightful claim to be something more than a mere daughter and mother? The voice and the genius matched the face. Whatever else was wrong, acknowledge that I had a right to be an artist, though my father's will was against it. My nature gave me a charter.

"I do acknowledge that," said Deronda, looking from the miniature to her face, which even in its pallor had an expression of living force beyond anything that the pencil could show. (pp. 728-729)

But in embracing Judaism Daniel will, of course, be much more than a "mere" son and father; he will have a vocation as well in political leadership, a legitimate outlet for *his* living force.

The subordinate position of women exists in the English as well as the Jewish part of the novel, of course. Gwendolen's tragic marriage comes about in part because social attitudes unanimously support her mother's reiterated contention that "Marriage is the only happy state for a woman," (p. 58) and Gwendolen's aunt and uncle fully share her own disparaging view of her sisters, "it [was] a pity there were so many girls." (p. 61) Gwendolen's cousin, Anna Gascoigne, the sister of "a brother whose pleasures apart from her were more than the sum total of hers," (p. 87) feels herself "much at home with the Meyrick girls, who knew what it was to have a brother, and to be generally regarded as of minor importance in the world." (p.717) We learn, in another repeated refrain, that "Lady Mallinger felt apologetically about herself as a woman who had produced nothing but daughters in a case where sons were required," (p.267) and we see how social norms confirm her self-image "as the infelicitous wife who had produced nothing but daughters, little better than

no children, poor dear things...." (p. 498) Far crueler than any of these instances is the outcast position of Grandcourt's cast-off mistress, Lydia Glasher, whose appearance in Gwendolen's life comes with the force of "some ghastly vision...in a dream...[saying] 'I am a woman's life.'" (p. 190) George Eliot certainly makes us aware of the injustice of the double standard governing society's very different treatment of Mrs. Glasher and Grandcourt, who as a potential husband for Gwendolen is regarded quite genially by her rector uncle, Mr. Gascoigne: "Whatever Grandcourt had done, he had not ruined himself; and it is well known that in gambling, for example, whether of the business or holiday sort, a man who has the strength of mind to leave off when he has only ruined others, is a reformed character." (p. 125)

But while exposing these inequities, George Eliot's narrative *persona* never frontally challenges them. In fact, the tone with which woman's inferior status is treated throughout the English sections is urbane, ironic, and at bottom one of resigned acceptance; it therefore differs radically from the princess's impassioned, angry, unforgiving outbursts, which, notably, are never mediated by any softening authorial comment. The irony and controlled satire characteristic of the English parts of the novel have, as indicated earlier, been contrasted to the emotional, idealizing treatment of the Jewish theme; in this contrast it is generally accepted (after Leavis) that George Eliot's more "mature" imagination was at work in the English sections, whereas her more "immature" emotionalism, not properly under conscious control, surfaced in the Jewish parts. In fact, more unconscious impulses may be revealed in the Jewish half of the novel than Leavis bothered to note. Which, after all, is the more "mature," "appropriate" perspective on the inferior status of women? Subdued irony, or impassioned rage?

We know, of course, that George Eliot did not consider herself a feminist. While approving of

educational opportunities for women who could benefit from them (she gave £50 toward the establishment of Girton College), and endorsing the Napoleonic ideal of “‘La carrière ouverte aux talen[t]s,’ whether the talents be feminine or masculine,”⁹ she was dubious of many feminist causes, such as the enfranchisement of women, and she repeatedly refused to undertake “specific enunciation of doctrine on a question so entangled as the ‘Woman Question.’”¹⁰ She could even assert that the fact that “woman seems to me to have the worse share in existence” should be the “basis for a sublimer resignation in woman and a more regenerating tenderness in man.”¹¹ It is hardly likely that she considered the princess’s assault on the role of the Jewish woman powerful enough to vitiate the novel’s dominant respectful and admiring attitude toward Jews, which was, after all, George Eliot’s clear, conscious intent.

Moreover, any assessment of the princess also has to accommodate the fundamentally disquieting fact of her having given her child to be raised by another, as of her admitted inability to love, both of which cannot help but qualify our sympathy with her, if not with her feminist indignation. Referring to these aspects of her experience, neither of which, obviously enough, can be in any way considered particularly Jewish, the princess extends the focus of her attack from the ideal of the Jewish woman to more widely diffused ideas about the uniform nature of womanhood itself:

People talk of their motives in a cut and dried way. Every woman is supposed to have the same set of motives, or else be a monster. I am not a monster, but I have not felt exactly what other women feel—or say they feel, for fear of being thought unlike others. When you reproach me in you heart for sending you away from me, you mean that I ought to say I felt about you as other women say they feel about their children. I did not feel that. I was glad to be freed from

you. But I did well for you, and I gave you your father’s fortune. (p. 691)

The princess’s rejection of motherhood because it conflicted with her chosen path to self-fulfillment remains a radical choice that is as disturbing today as it must have been at the time, when it preceded by only a few years the by now proverbial shock waves sent reverberating throughout Europe by Nora Helmer’s slamming of the door. Then too, the laws of poetic justice under which George Eliot usually operates further suggest that the princess—whom we meet years after her glorious career is over, as an unhappy, sick and dying woman, driven by forces almost beyond her control to reveal to Deronda the secret of his birth which she had worked so hard to conceal—is, for all her eloquence and charisma, probably intended to be more strongly judged than applauded.

Yet George Eliot was certainly aware of the subordinate position of women both in Victorian English society and in traditional Judaism, as of some of the differences between the two, and it may be that she found it easier to attack such subordination—or at least to allow her charac-



ters to attack it—when it appeared in an alien culture and when the attack was placed in the mouth of a character whom we are not, nominally, encouraged to approve. The white heat of the princess's unremitting resentment at the bondage imposed on her by her sexual identity is strikingly without parallel in any of George Eliot's other—and English—female characters. (And while she is the only woman in George Eliot's fiction to express the conflict between creative self-fulfilment and motherhood, we might legitimately be tempted to speculate whether George Eliot's own decision not to have children may have had sources beyond her irregular—in Victorian terms—relationship with Lewes.)

George Eliot's awareness of the subordinate position of women in traditional Judaism also finds its way into the novel in quiet, unobtrusive ways as well. One of the Meyrick girls, for example, "who was much of a practical reformer" and has visited a synagogue with Mirah, "could not restrain a question. 'Excuse me, Mirah, but *does* it seem quite right to you that the women should sit behind rails in a gallery apart?'" (p. 410) George Eliot herself reported of one of her many visits to a synagogue, this one in Amsterdam, "in the evening we went to see the worship there. Not a woman was present, but of devout *men* not a few, curious reversal of what one sees in other temples."¹² And Ezra Cohen refers to the traditional Jewish prayer in which "A man is bound to thank God, as we do every Sabbath, that he was not made a woman; but a woman has to thank God that He has made her according to His will" (p. 636)—a clear error on George Eliot's part (as an early Jewish critic pointed out) for this thanksgiving is in fact part of the *daily* morning prayer.

Although Daniel "will not say that I shall profess to believe exactly as my fathers have believed" (p. 792), there is no suggestion that he has in mind revitalizing Judaism in any way that would affect the position of women or make it possible to accommodate the princess's artistic

and cosmopolitan aspirations. Daniel's chosen bride Mirah, with her preternaturally small feet, dismisses Amy Meyrick's question about the synagogue's revealing seating arrangement with the pious reply, "Yes, I never thought of anything else" (p. 410), and willingly embraces the life of a Jewish woman. But both Gwendolen Harleth and the Princess Halm-Eberstein are more interesting and convincing women than Mirah, and neither can be so automatically "capable," as Daniel says of Mirah, "of submitting to anything in the form of duty." (p. 617) Daniel submits to a wider duty at the end, but, as I have suggested, it is clear that this duty offers him far greater scope than the duties of a Jewish daughter, wife and mother, as presented in this novel, can offer any woman. As it appears in the novel, comparable human scope can be found by a Jewish woman only through denying her Jewishness; and this may suggest that when one ponders the role of Daniel's mother and the "woman question" in general in *Daniel Deronda*, the novel may emerge as somewhat less idealizing of Jewish life than it is generally taken—and was consciously intended—to be.

NOTES

1. Barbara Hardy, "Introduction," George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed., Barbara Hardy (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 17.
2. Henry James, "Daniel Deronda: A Conversation," *Atlantic Monthly*, 38 (Dec. 1876); reprinted in *George Eliot: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed., George R. Creeger (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), p. 172.
3. F. R. Leavis, "Introduction to the Torchbook Edition," George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1961), p. xvii.
4. Hardy, "Introduction," p. 15.
5. Hardy, "Introduction," p. 15.
6. George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed., Barbara Hardy, p. 326. All other citations to the novel will be to this edition and subsequent page references will be included in the text.
7. Edgar Rosenberg sees Lapidoth as a "link with the Shylock tradition" in his discussion of *Daniel Deronda* in *From Shylock to Svengali* (Stanford, California, 1960), pp. 168-170.
8. Rosenberg, p. 173.
9. *The George Eliot Letters* II, ed. Gordon Haight (New Haven: Yale U. Press, 1954), p. 396.
10. *Letters* II, p. 86; Gordon Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (N.Y. & Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 1968), p. 396; *Letters* II, p. 398. See also *Letters* V (1955), p. 58.
11. Haight, *George Eliot*, p. 396.
12. *Letters* IV (1955), p. 298.



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