

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

Issue 20.2 (Summer 2024)

Victorian Others and Genre in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*

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<1>*Daniel Deronda* (1876) is George Eliot's only contemporary novel, as its action occurs between 1864 and 1866. Eliot's Victorian reader, however, found the novel's Jewish part too foreign to be included in an English novel and too idealized to be a suitable subject for her realist novel.⁽¹⁾ The favorable portraits of foreign vision against the harsh critique of upper-class English society parallel the novel's dual plot of the English and Jewish parts. While Gwendolen Harleth's story in the English part deals with how her life is shaped by her choices and conditions of her society in a realist mode, *Daniel Deronda*'s story in the Jewish part resembles a heroic romance of discovery of origin and fulfillment of idealized visions. Both the early reception and later criticisms of the novel have focused on the seeming split between the realism of the English half and romance of the Jewish half as a lack of formal consistency and expressed discomfort about the Jewish half.⁽²⁾ *Daniel Deronda*'s shift in form and subject has been a significant critical focus in George Eliot studies. Some critics have emphasized the dividedness of the novel's dual plot, while others have focused on the novel's break from realist convention to include alien culture and vision.⁽³⁾ Instead of seeing the dual form in *Daniel Deronda* as a divided structure, I propose that it is through the novel's experimental form and subject matter that Eliot was able to critically engage with the questions of women's alienation and the nation's injustice to the 'Other' such as Jews and colonized people.

<2>Eliot's letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe shows that Eliot's impulse was to excite her contemporary readers' imagination to re-vision their relation to religio-racial 'Others' such as the Jews and persons of colonial origin:

As to the Jewish element in ‘Deronda,’ I expected from first to last in writing it, that it would create much stronger resistance and even repulsion than it has actually met with. . . Moreover, not only towards the Jews, but towards all oriental peoples with whom we English come in contact, a spirit of arrogance and contemptuous dictatorialness is observable which has become a national disgrace to us. There is nothing I should care more to do, if it were possible, than to rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow-men who most differ from them in customs and beliefs.(4)

Although Eliot anticipated negative responses to her favorable depiction of the Jewish part, Eliot expanded the novel’s theme and narrative structure to urge the readers to overcome their prejudice about other cultures in *Daniel Deronda*.(5) The Jews in Eliot’s time posed a peculiar difficulty to common assumptions on race, culture, and nation in an era when racial others were generally deemed dangerous. These differences made Jews particularly feared for the potential they supposedly carried to contaminate the healthy sameness of the English nation, as many critics have noted.(6) There had been extensive public debates over the rights of Jews and their place in England by the 1870s when Eliot wrote *Daniel Deronda*. As Hilary M. Schor examines, Eliot’s novel registers the general anxiety about the place of ‘strangers’ such as Jews and women in the nation. The expansion of Jewish rights over the next thirty years after the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828 and the Act of Catholic Emancipation in 1829 raised “the deeper concerns that hover over the encroachment of strangers on the community: would this mean an end to the community, in the form of the nation, itself?” (Schor 186). At a historical moment when Jews faced prejudice and public debate over their rights and place in the nation, Eliot included the Jewish plot in *Daniel Deronda* to set Jewish people’s connection with their cultural heritage against the rootlessness and lack of a moral foundation in English society.

<3>Eliot contrasts the vitality and continuity of Judaism with the disorientation and moral fatigue of English culture in Gwendolen’s story.(7) Gwendolen reflects her society, which drifts without larger ideals and is driven by individuals’ small desires. The novel begins in a German casino where Gwendolen is winning at roulette. The individual players in the casino are so obsessed with gambling that they show only “a certain uniform negativeness of expression” (7), as their same desire to win makes them resemble one another. The narrator connects trade and social rank through the gambling scene by describing a London tradesman: “In his bearing there might be something of the tradesman, but in his pleasureshe was fit to rank with the owners of the oldest titles” (7). It is the market-driven capitalism of the tradesman and the spiritual emptiness of the upper class in their pursuit of luck in gambling that Eliot

compares and is critical of in the novel. The gambling scene shows how Gwendolen's life is driven and limited by the desire to win. Her pursuit of luck in gambling blinds her to others' loss, and her blindness reflects the same ills at the family and national levels.

<4>The supposed two plots of the English and Jewish parts intersect in the theme of the connection between self and other, winner and loser, colonizer and colonized. As Gwendolen gained from another's loss in gambling, her family's wealth was also made from another race's loss because the fortune came from colonial labor in the West Indies. As the narrator notes, "She had no notion how her maternal grandfather got the fortune inherited by his two daughters; but he had been a West Indian" (20). Although Gwendolen is ignorant of the source of her family's fortune, the novel represents that her family's life is linked with colonialism (Newton 105-106). Winners are connected with losers. Gwendolen in the casino soon hears that her family is ruined due to risky investments. Her family's money from the West Indies contributed to the nation's modern economy, but her family lost their money due to the bank's failure. As Daniel tells her, these turns of fortune force readers and Gwendolen to see that "one's gain is another's loss" (322).

<5>*Daniel Deronda* implies further connections among women, Jews, and blacks through the use of the language of slavery. Gwendolen's marriage to Grandcourt is described as a power struggle for domination instead of love. The narrator notes that Grandcourt would have wielded his power to "govern a difficult colony" (571) after he tells Gwendolen about his power over her: "As my wife, you must take my word about what is proper for you" (571). Gwendolen tells Daniel that she "could do nothing but sit there like a galley-slave" (669) when Grandcourt took her for a sail to prevent her from meeting with Daniel. Carolyn Lesjak finds in Gwendolen's marital relation with Grandcourt "the interrelatedness . . . of Grandcourt's domestic and imperial mentalities" and claims that "Eliot's feminism here becomes a powerful instrument in her critique of imperialism" (27).⁽⁸⁾ There are also references to Gwendolen's grandfather's estate in Barbados, the Civil War in America, and the Morant Bay rebellion (316), which evokes a connection among women, Jews, and blacks as the others that the English nation appropriates and dominates. When Grandcourt views the Jamaican black, George William Gordon who was charged and executed for complicity in the Morant Bay Rebellion, as "a beastly sort of Baptist Caliban," Daniel expresses a deeper understanding toward Gordon by saying that he has always "felt a little with Caliban, who naturally had his own point of view and could sing a good song" (316) in their talk about Governor Eyre's brutal suppression of the 1865 rebellion in Jamaica. Daniel also expresses his sympathy toward racial others by expressing that "the whites had to thank themselves for the

half-breeds” when Captain Torrington says that “the blacks would be manageable enough if it were not for the half-breeds” (316). These references to West Indian plantations and the Morant Bay Rebellion register the nation’s concerns about its changing relation with colonies and increasing colonial conflicts after the 1857 Indian Rebellion and the Morant Bay Rebellion in 1865. Daniel’s replies suggest a more favorable and open-minded attitude to colonial others, while the English characters express their dominance and racial prejudice. These moments in the novel show Eliot’s critique of inequality of domestic and colonial relations and colonial injustice.

<6>Although Grandcourt considers Jamaican blacks abominable, Eliot carefully associates Grandcourt with barbarity and lack of culture, as Daniel’s replies imply. Grandcourt remarkably embodies the emptiness of his class, as David Kaufmann sums up: “Everything remains fair outwardly, while beneath the glitter of the tinsel there is naught but hollowness and decay, and while hidden beneath this beauteous envelope the heart is lying broken” (53). The words that describe Grandcourt remind the reader of the aristocracy which Matthew Arnold calls “Barbarians” in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869): “The Barbarians brought with them that staunch individualism, as the modern phrase is, and that passion for doing as one likes, for the assertion of personal liberty. . . . The stronghold and natural seat of this passion was in the nobles of whom our aristocratic class are the inheritors” (69). When Gwendolen considers marrying Grandcourt, she expects to gain “the dignities, the luxuries, the power of doing a great deal of what she liked to do” (130) from her marriage. It is, however, Grandcourt who dominates her to do as he likes.

<7>Eliot reverses the dichotomy of “civilized English” and “barbarous colonized” by associating Grandcourt and his class with the Barbarians. The reversed dichotomy anticipates the critical focus of contemporary postcolonial studies on the dichotomy in colonial discourse central to maintaining European hegemony over colonized others. The reversed dichotomy in Eliot’s novel departs from the hegemonic attitude towards other cultures that Edward Said calls “a particular knowledge and structures of attitude and reference” (53) of imperial culture in *Culture and Imperialism*. While Said claims that “there was scarcely any dissent, any departure, any demurral” (53) from these structures of attitude, Eliot shows a dissent by reversing the colonial dichotomy in Grandcourt. Said in *Orientalism* also claims that the nineteenth-century novel contributed to the construction of England’s cultural others as backward by depicting them as “devoid of energy and initiative” (38) and “lethargic” (39). Eliot in *Daniel Deronda*, however, depicts the main English characters’ ennui and boredom from the novel’s first chapter. The first chapter ends with Gwendolen’s “I am always bored” (12), and Grandcourt also grumbles that “[m]ost things are

bores” (129). The narrator also later depicts him “grumbling at the *ennui* of staying so long in this stupid dance” (426). Eliot calls the boredom of this English life “a disease” (395) through Daniel’s words: he replies to Gwendolen that “what we call the dullness of things is a disease in ourselves” (395) when she justifies gambling as a refuge from boredom.

<8>While Gwendolen is trapped within her disintegrated community, Mirah is rooted in her Jewish heritage through the memories of her mother. Mirah’s connection to her heritage through her mother’s memories distinguishes her from Gwendolen. While Eliot associates “the optimistic model of organic memory” with Jewish heritage, she portrays Gwendolen as lacking childhood roots and thus as “a rootless creature whose life seems dictated more by Darwinian chance than rooted inheritance” (Shuttleworth 53). The absence of a connection to her inheritance leads to Gwendolen’s lack of unity and moral ground. The novel represents Gwendolen as lacking an “early home” where she could experience “the love of tender kinship,” while Mirah’s connection to her mother and people sustains her. The narrator describes Gwendolen’s rootlessness:

A human life, I think, should be well rooted in some spot of a native land, . . . a spot where the definiteness of early memories may be inwrought with affection, and kindly acquaintance with all neighbours, even to the dogs and donkeys, may spread not by sentimental effort and reflection, but as a sweet habit of the blood. . . . But this blessed persistence in which affection can take root had been wanting in Gwendolen’s life. (19)

This passage emphasizes rootedness as the base of going beyond the narrowness of the self to be “citizens of the world.” The “sweet habit of the blood” should be established in one’s life before one can “soar above preference into impartiality” (19). Eliot’s *The Impressions of Theophrastus Such* also discusses the same idea: “[T]he consciousness of having a native country, the birthplace of common memories and habits of mind, existing like a parental hearth” is “the root of human virtues, both public and private” (147), which would prevent Englishmen from suffering “moral degradation” (147).

<9>Conversely, Mirah in the novel represents “the importance of a deeply felt connection to family and culture” (Anderson 139), which is the central lack of Gwendolen and her society. The religion of the Jewish people comes as an element of national memories that becomes a moral principle of the Jewish characters that the English people in the novel lack. Mirah’s story tells that it is her mother who keeps her from being wicked and connects her with her people. Mirah tells Mrs.

Meyrick and her daughters that “if I got wicked I should lose my world of happy thoughts where my mother lived with me” (205), and it was her mother who taught Mirah about the history of her people. Mirah’s mother also taught her “Hebrew hymns” (202) from early childhood, which enabled Mirah’s singing to be linked with the history and culture of her people. Mirah’s singing is set against Gwendolen’s singing which comes from her small and narrow world and shows the defect of “the passion and thought of people without any breadth of horizon” (45), as Klesmer points out. This conception of rootedness as a moral ground resonates with Daniel’s advice to Gwendolen. He makes a comparison between Gwendolen’s world, in which “all passion is spent in that narrow round, for want of ideas and sympathies to make a larger home for it,” and Jewish people’s “higher, religious life,” which “holds an enthusiasm for something more than our own appetites and vanities” (434-435).

<10>Eliot is critical of Gwendolen’s society by representing her as a product of English culture without higher ideals. As Brooks observes, Eliot asks how a woman can live life “in such a system of patriarchally imposed constraints” (100) in Gwendolen’s story. The religion lost its role in her community, as her uncle, Rev. Gascoigne, treated her as a commodity in the marriage market. Her mother also says, “Marriage is the only state for a woman” (26). As both her uncle and her mother are trapped within the claims of their mercenary culture, Gwendolen also considers marriage in terms of power and according to the marriage market. Grandcourt also sees marriage as power and contract, as the narrator notes: “he had won her by the rank and luxuries he had to give her, and these she had got; he had fulfilled his side of the contract” (644).

<11>While Gwendolen, following her English community, sees marriage as a way of “entering on a luxurious life by a short and easy road” (249), Mirah refuses to marry a count who would lead her to his place where she could be “queen of everything” (209). Gwendolen wants to be a queen by marrying Grandcourt and through his status, but Mirah refuses the idea of selling her to a marriage. Mirah tells her story that “I thought God was warning me: my mother’s voice was in my soul” (211), which gave her courage to run away with “the strange clearness within” (211) from her father who intended to force her to marry the rich count. The memory of her mother sustains Mirah because it is also linked with the history of her people who have been afflicted and scattered from land to land. As the narrator notes, Daniel sees in Mirah that “Judaism was something still throbbing in human lives,” and he finds “an effectual remedy for *ennui*” (347) in his new interest in Judaism.

<12>The story of Gwendolen's growth is "a series of profoundly de-centering events" (Hollander 71), which Daniel describes as "a painful letting in of light" (435). The imagery of "painful letting in of light" implies a rupture in her world through which light can come in. George Levine observes an ethical ideal of knowing other cultures to be *Daniel Deronda's* main subject, noting the problem of solipsism: "How can we know anything about what isn't us when standing between us and the world is that enormous, overshadowing, often inchoate self, which filters all signals from the outside, obtrudes its desires on everything. . .?" (172). As Levine answers this question, "only by breaking the constraints of the self can we make true contact with other people and not simply impose ourselves upon them" (172). Gwendolen learns to go beyond her narrow desire and indifference to others' loss from her encounters with the others from other cultures. Klesmer critiques Gwendolen's narrow artistic horizon which he interprets as reflecting English cultural narrowness: "It is a form of melody which expresses a puerile state of culture. . . It makes men small as they listen to it" (45). After Klesmer judges her singing, the narrator describes Gwendolen that "a sinking of heart at the sudden width of horizon opened round her small musical performance" (45). At the beginning of the novel, Eliot describes Gwendolen as the fittest who survives with "inborn energy of egoistic desire" (38). However, the encounters with Daniel, Klesmer, and Mrs. Glasher widen her narrow world to go beyond her small desire and know more about how her life is connected with others.

<13>Gwendolen learns that one's gain is another's loss most painfully in her marriage to Grandcourt. She marries him, although Mrs. Glasher, his mistress with whom he has illegitimate children, asks her not to marry him so that her son may become his heir. Gwendolen begins the painful journey to "look on other lives besides [her] own" and "see what their troubles are, and how they are borne" so that she may eventually "care about something in this vast world besides the gratification of small selfish desires" (429). Gwendolen's de-centering experience culminates when she learns that Daniel marries Mirah and leaves for the East. The narrator depicts this moment as awakening from her "small life": "She was for the first time . . . being dislodged from her supremacy in her own world" (774). Gwendolen's experience parallels the novel's experimental form and plot. As Gwendolen is de-centered and her world becomes widened by the encounters with the other, Eliot's novel expands the boundaries of realist convention to urge the English nation to overcome its prejudice about other cultures and to imagine an ethical relation to the other. Both Gwendolen's experience and the rupture in the novel's form can be read in terms of Levinas's ethics which begins with the encounter with the other rather than with the self's principles. Levinas emphasizes that the other's alterity cannot be encompassed within the self's categories, but rather the other ruptures and expands

the self's world. Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* distinguishes “self-centered totalistic thinking that organizes men and things into power systems, and gives us control over nature and other people” (Wild 17) from the ethical encounter with the other, which exceeds any totalizing system and disturbs the self's world.⁽⁹⁾ The shift and rupture in her novel's form and plot reflect Eliot's vision to imagine possibilities of openness to the other without containing the other in terms of the self.

<14>Eliot's novel goes beyond the confines of realism to accommodate alternative stories of marginalized groups. Instead of containing Gwendolen's story and foreign culture within the realist convention, Eliot risked the harsh reception of the novel by including the Jewish plot and ending the novel with unconventional closure. Gwendolen's story ends without the traditional closure of marriage, and Daniel and Mirah leave the domesticity of England to go to the East with an uncertain future that the realist narrative cannot describe. Eliot's engagement with the changing social landscape of her Victorian England led to the experimental form and plot that enacts her critique of domestic and colonial injustice. Eliot in *Daniel Deronda* self-consciously reconstructs her inheritance of realism to envision inclusivity by overcoming the provinciality of English perspectives and the accompanying prejudices about cultural 'Others.'

Notes

(1)One of Eliot's contemporary responses notes that “the author seems to go out ... into a world completely foreign to us. What can be the design of this ostentatious separation from the universal instinct of Christendom, this subsidence into Jewish hopes and aims?” (qtd. in Lewis 194).^(^)

(2)F. R. Leavis's suggestion of renaming the novel “Gwendolen Harleth” and removing “the weak and bad side” (85) of Daniel's story in the novel demonstrates critics' uneasiness about the Jewish part in the novel: “In no other of her works is the association of the strength with the weakness so remarkable or so unfortunate as in *Daniel Deronda*. . . the mass of fervid and wordy unreality seems to have absorbed most of the attention the book has ever had” (79). Peter K. Garrett also notes on the novel's dual plot in the two modes that “*Deronda*'s story turns from the familiar and conventionally probable toward the idealized figures, mythic patterns, and visionary utterances of romance” (168).^(^)

(3)For Crosby, “man's historical identity, his ideal humanity, is secured at woman's expense” (14) in *Daniel Deronda*'s dual plot. Suzanne Graver observes that *Daniel Deronda* is Eliot's “most extreme” in her depiction of the “radical disease” of

English society and the “radical cure” of Jewish vision (20). Connecting gender and race issues, Susan Meyer argues that *Daniel Deronda* associates alien races with female rebellion depicted through Gwendolen and suppresses both female social discontent and the Jews by removing them away from the English world of the novel. Rachel Hollander argues that *Daniel Deronda*’s divided structure is “literary manifestations . . . of shifting ethical values” (21), which she terms “narrative hospitality.”(△)

(4)*The George Eliot Letters*: Vol. 6, 1874-1877, quoted in Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism*, pp. 191-192.(△)

(5) Gillian Beer also claims that Eliot emphasizes “the failure of the British to perceive their connections with other races and culture” (187) in *Daniel Deronda*. George Levine argues that “*Daniel Deronda*’s various plots replay a central issue: is it possible to know anything, but particularly other people and cultures, without imposing on them the distorting desires of the aspiring self” (180). About the status of Jews in England, Bornstein notes that “England was the last Western European country except for Spain and Portugal to grant full civil equality to Jews. . . during the nineteenth century Jews still could not be elected to Parliament until 1858, graduate from universities until 1871, nor would they achieve full emancipation until 1890” (371-372).(△)

(6) Nineteenth-century anti-Semitism positions considered the Jews as “alien, anachronistic, a foreign body inimical to collective health” (Crosby 14). David Goldberg also notes that imperial states like Britain proceeded on an assumption of racial sameness and of externalizing difference, which would appear in two forms of “exclusionary disciplining of difference and . . . the rule of sameness” (82). The Jews were cited by Paul Broca in the Anthropological Society’s first publications as evidence against evolutionary ideas: “The Jewish race, scattered for more than eighteen centuries in the most different climate, is everywhere the same now as it was in Egypt at the time of the Pharaohs” (qtd. in Beer 190).(△)

(7) Nancy Henry argues, “For Eliot, Judaism represented an ideal of cultural coherence preserved over centuries, despite persecution” (231). Rachel Hollander argues that “To dramatize the breakdown she senses in traditional English society, Eliot creates an idealized “Jewish plot” that serves to call into question the structures of community out of which the realist novel develops” (63).(△)

(8) Lovesey also finds “a detailed critique of Victorian sexual politics, the moral consequences of empire, and in fact the very ethic of Englishness” (517) in *Daniel*

Deronda in which female characters and colonized people are positioned in a similar status.(^)

(9)Rachel Hollander reads the novel's style and ethics in Levinasian terms: "The two-part structure of the text dramatizes its own hospitality to "other" stories, and challenges the reader to respond to an unfamiliar fictional presence" (63).Williamson also argues that "[the] fracturing of the cohesive realist worldview into two independent yet intersecting plots is the formal manifestation of the realist narrator/author's split or dislodged egoism" (41) in *Daniel Deronda*.(^)

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