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“A DIFFERENCE OF NATIVE LANGUAGE”: GENDER, GENRE, AND REALISM IN DANIEL DERONDA

BY SARAH GATES

Genre studies of Daniel Deronda generally find themselves addressing the issue identified in Jerome Beaty’s 1959 essay as “The Question of Unity.” That is, in response to Leavis’s judgment that the Jewish half of the novel ought to be removed and the novel renamed Gwendolen Harleth, critics have either defended the novel’s unity or proposed new ways to understand its doubleness, often by calling the English plot something like “realism” (or “social realism” or “novel”) and the Deronda plot something nonrealistic (“romance,” “epic,” or even “allegory”). However, the generic structures in the novel present a more complex picture than such a stark division into two plot lines suggests. For one thing, the protagonists from either side occupy a plot and genre together; for another, each half is animated by the play of more than one generic convention and by the relationship between these traditional genres and their realistic context. Whereas in Eliot’s earlier fiction the force of realism acts as a kind of demystification of the energies produced by, for example, romance or pastoral in order to rein them in to the stable domestic closures that constitute the transcendent endings traditional to English realism, in Deronda Eliot adds the weightier energies of epic and tragedy to the kinds of romance that have directed so many of the stories in her earlier works, and in so doing stretches that force beyond its capacity to perform this demystifying and domesticating function. Furthermore, as she does in the other novels, Eliot includes the complication of characters who occupy at the novel’s opening unmarriageable subject positions; that is, they have internalized as their life stories antidomestic genres—and worse, internalized the “wrong” gender roles within those genres. In the earlier novels, a husband and wife are created out of such antidomestic materials fairly easily in order for domestic closure to take place, partly by means of a process that Nancy Miller has called “the regime of the male gaze” which virilizes the male and feminizes the female (causes her to see, as Miller says, “as a woman” rather than as, for example, a knight or saint). This process, which seems only slightly disturbing in Adam Bede (for
example) becomes painfully dramatic in *Deronda*, where the domestic scene to which the female hero must sacrifice ambition and potential not only has no transcendence but becomes a virtual prison. Moreover, the re-gendering regime fails to domesticate her in the usual way, so that while the eponymous hero sails off successfully into his new epic script, she is left in the only position available to her dangerous energies: that of tragic scapegoat. To understand the nature of Eliot's feminism in these intersections of gender, literary form, and realistic technique is my aim in this essay.

The novel’s epigraph seems an apt place to begin—unpacking, as it does, the aphorism about “limits” that opens the epilogue to *Middlemarch* (that “every limit is a beginning as well as an ending”):

> Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning. Even Science, the strict measurer, is obliged to start with a make-believe unit, and must fix on a point in the stars’ unceasing journey when his sidereal clock shall pretend that time is at Nought. His less accurate grandmother Poetry has always been understood to start in the middle; but on reflection it appears that her proceeding is not very different from his; since Science, too, reckons backwards as well as forwards, divides his unit into billions, and with his clock-finger at Nought really sets off in medias res. No retrospect will take us to the true beginning; and whether our prologue be in heaven or on earth, it is but a fraction of that all-presupposing fact with which our story sets out.5

These two quotations can be said to form the limit between *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*; together they constitute an interesting discussion of limits and stories, of what D. A. Miller calls “closure” and “narratable.”6 The sentence from *Middlemarch* makes clear that the borders of narration are interchangeable, that since the points of exit can so easily become points of entry, all limits are necessarily arbitrary. However, the epigraph from *Daniel Deronda* exposes an even deeper instability: that what is “make-believe” about the beginning is that these single points of exit or entry are capable of becoming landscapes in themselves. The final sentence illustrates this kind of instability most economically: “no retrospect will take us to the true beginning; and whether our prologue be in heaven or on earth, it is but a fraction of that all-presupposing fact with which our story sets out.” The abstract and nonexistent “true beginning,” once sought and posited, flowers into a “prologue,” which is not an originating moment, but in fact a predating and prefiguring story. And yet no sooner is this idea of story brought before us than, in an astonishing reversal of perspective, it vanishes again into the abstract
momentariness of "a fraction of that all-presupposing fact." Here, in one sentence, we are shown the "systole and diastole" of story-making, in which limit and story contract and expand into one another in an "unceasing journey."

This revelation of the arbitrariness and instability of narrative shape will have a profound effect upon the aims and form of the realism in the novel that follows. We don't get a straight chronology, as we have had in every other Eliot novel, for example. Instead, we are given an almost modern series of flashbacks and "prologues" which "reckon backwards as well as forwards" from the opening moment in which Daniel sees Gwendolen at the gambling table in Leubronn. The desire for closure created by this format is for a revelation of "the true beginning"—the transcendent origin that can give shape and meaning to this otherwise "unceasing journey"—rather than for the consummation of a transcendent marriage. Thus romance, which in Eliot's earlier fiction has been uncomfortably domesticated into proper marital closure, becomes monstrous and Gothic (in the story of Gwendolen and Grandcourt) or is quashed and subsumed by the more pressing requirements of epic heroism (in the story of Daniel, Mordecai, and Mirah). Stripped of transcendence, it is replaced as closure by the finding or making of a "true beginning": Daniel's setting out for the East to found a Jewish nation. Thus, Deronda's closure reenacts the last sentence of its opening epigraph, for it is the "true beginning" that ends the novel, and which makes it a prologue to the greater untold story of Israel, that "all-presupposing fact" of which Daniel Deronda "is but a fraction" (3).

Of course, the search for origins and the creation of nations come from a different genre than the search for domestic happiness, and so we receive our first indication here that the realism in Daniel Deronda will be woven as much from strands of epic as from those of romance. However, an epic realism must be peopled differently, and the ordinary or middling people of mixed character, leading hidden and unhistoric lives, are replaced or eclipsed by extraordinarily visible and famous personages (like Klesmer or Alchirisi) or by the symbolic (rather than realistic) characters, such as the evil Grandcourt, whose horror is never satisfactorily traced according to a realistic psychological or sociological standard of characterization (however minutely and vividly it is portrayed), and the mystical Mordecai, whose prophetic recognition of Daniel cannot be comprehended realistically, but only as a leap of faith that is alien to an empirical understanding of human intercourse. The hero that results from the mystical infusion of this divine Mordecai into Daniel comes from a people who could still be perceived as living in a
culture that had yet to perform the epic task of founding a nation, a task whose generic scope reaches far beyond even the fullest, most epic-seeming, but essentially domestic and personal scope of Middlemarch. The resulting novel is understandably complex, for it involves an intricate balancing of several generic conflicts. If Gwendolen and Daniel carry on a relationship with each other that is pungently romantic, they also inhabit relationships with other characters according to the demands of different generic conventions. Thus, as characters, they are each divided across subject positions which correspond to their different generic roles. Moreover, if Gwendolen’s and Daniel’s stories are more easily understood by examining the generic conventions that direct their unfolding, the fates of those characters and their relationship to each other also tell us something about the form of Daniel Deronda. For in the end, a hoped-for union or marriage will instead diverge into two very different conclusions. Instead, in other words, of somehow fulfilling this romance by marrying Gwendolen’s tragedy to Daniel’s epic in order to create the broadest possible kind of realism (one which would illustrate not only the microcosm of domesticity, but also its macrocosmic equivalent, the family of nations), the two forms rend the novel into two closures whose stark iconography a small infusion of realism only tempers—or, more accurately (as I will demonstrate in more detail later), the struggle for control over form is won by epic and tragedy, which appropriate a few realistic details to give their closures flesh: Daniel sailing off to achieve his epic destiny (but happily married), Gwendolen abandoned and isolated (but alive and living at home).

About mid-novel, the narrator gives us a description of Sir Hugo Mallinger’s stables (built into the choir of a pre-Henry VIII abbey) which can be read as an architectural portrait of this process:

The exterior—its west end, save for the stable door, walled in with brick and covered with ivy—was much defaced, maimed of finial and gargoyle, the friable limestone broken and fretted, and lending its soft grey to a powdery dark lichen; the long windows, too, were filled in with brick as far as the springing of the arches, the broad clerestory windows with wire or ventilating blinds. With the low wintry afternoon sun upon it, sending shadows from the cedar boughs, and lighting up the touches of snow remaining on every ledge, it had still a scarcely disturbed aspect of antique solemnity, which gave the scene in the interior rather a startling effect; though, ecclesiastical or reverential indignation apart, the eyes could hardly help dwelling with pleasure on its piquant picturesqueness. Each finely-arched chapel was turned into a stall, where in the dusty glazing of the windows there still gleamed patches of crimson, orange,
blue, and palest violet; for the rest, the choir had been gutted, the floor levelled, paved, and drained according to the most approved fashion, and a line of loose-boxes erected in the middle: a soft light fell from the upper windows on sleek brown or grey flanks and haunches, on mild equine faces looking out with active nostrils over the varnished brown boarding; on the hay hanging from racks where the saints once looked down from the altar-pieces, and on the pale-golden straw scattered or in heaps; on a little white-and-liver-coloured spaniel making his bed on the back of an elderly hackney, and on four ancient angels, still showing signs of devotion like mutilated martyrs—while over all, the grand pointed roof, untouched by reforming wash, showed its lines and colours mysteriously through veiling shadow and cobweb, and a hoof now and then striking against the boards seemed to fill the vault with thunder, while outside there was the answering bay of the bloodhounds. (390–91)

This description enacts in microcosm the struggle of realism to contain, even to secularize, generic elements that are too exalted for its domestic sphere. In it, the descriptive act continually fails to contain its own resonances, as though the abbey itself were resisting its domestication, its "stable-ization"—were, in fact, resacralizing the domesticity of the stable, just as the Deronda plot of the epic recovery of Judaic roots comprehends—and exalts—the familial and marital stories that give it flesh. We are warned of this effect early on, for the "scarcely disturbed aspect of antique solemnity" of the exterior "[gives] to the scene in the interior" (the gutting, leveling, paving, draining, and especially the inhabitants) a "startling effect"—it is the modern and the secular that are strange and "startling"—and ineffective against the solemn power of the "scarcely disturbed" and sacred antique. The disjunction between these two worlds, the narrator tells us, creates a scene of "piquant picturesqueness." But as the description moves forward, "piquant picturesqueness" can hardly characterize this scene of increasingly uncanny power, in which the echoes of a single "hoof now and then striking against the boards" become an ominous thudding in the vault, "answered" by bloodhounds—a precise enactment of cause failing to explain its effects, of the real to contain, for example, the sublime.

The "soft light" that falls "from the upper windows" exalts the ordinary in a different fashion: it gathers the "mild equine faces," "the hay," "the pale-golden straw," the "little white-and-liver-coloured spaniel," and the "elderly hackney" into its mysterious glow and draws them upward to the "four ancient angels, still showing signs of devotion like mutilated martyrs" and then into the "grand pointed roof, untouched by reforming wash, show[ing] its lines and colours mysteriously through..."
veiling shadow and cobweb," which crowns the scene. The natural and ordinary elements become mystically symbolic in the clerestory light; at the same time, their enumeration as realistic details shades into the poetry of epic catalogue. We are seeing an architectural figure of the resacralizing of what had, for the nationalistic purposes of the squirearchy (for the conversion of England, in other words, away from Roman Catholicism and to Anglicanism), been secularized during the Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry VIII, and later domesticated for "the keeping of saddle horses" under the modernizing "reforming wash" of Sir Hugo Mallinger's renovations. However, this choir has not converted to a stable; it has absorbed a stable into its own mysterious and grand poetry, just as the epic and tragic closures of the novel overpower and contain the realistic details that are supposed to contain them. We are a long way from the ordinary drawing rooms of the middle class, either in content or in tone. Instead, we see an extraordinary collection of disjunctive elements—horses and angels, straw and stained glass—just like the novel itself, which is peopled with Jewish prophets, famous musicians, and extraordinary protagonists. Cozy domesticity cannot assimilate them any more than the stable can assimilate the Gothic choir that houses it. In Daniel Deronda, such domesticity is given only to minor characters (the Gascoignes, the Cohens, the Meyricks) who provide the realistic background against which the sublime or heroic struggles of the protagonists take place—struggles to which I would now like to turn in order to explore the gendered and generic trajectories that govern them.

Daniel and Gwendolen are both doubly divided—between genre and genre and between genre and gender, for they inhabit different genres in their individual plots while the romance they inhabit together is gender-reversed. Straightening them out is not as simple a matter as it is, for example, in Middlemarch, which contains in the Dorothea/Will story a similar cross-gendered romance. For while Dorothea Brooke always had the essential feminine instinct for self-sacrifice, which only needs rechanneling from the saintly to the motherly, and Will Ladislaw, however feminine his appearance or checkered his parentage, possesses all the egoistic desire for distinction—the ambition—needed by a hero-turned-political-reformer, Gwendolen completely lacks that instinct for self-sacrifice, Deronda, the egoism. To re-gender this pair would require a virtual exchange of traits (rather than the mere rechanneling of what each already has) in the kind of radical conversion inadmissible in the evolutionary model followed by the realistic system of plausible character development, so the realistic force must find another way to
contain or transcend such instability. This narratable material is launched quite clearly in the opening paragraphs of the novel, which figures the competition for generic and gendered dominance in its first gaze:

Was she beautiful or not beautiful? and what was the secret of form or expression which gave the dynamic quality to her glance? Was the good or the evil genius dominant in those beams? Probably the evil; else why was the effect that of unrest rather than of undisturbed charm? Why was the wish to look again felt as coercion and not as a longing in which the whole being consents? (3)

This is a most unusual opening portrait of a novel's heroine because it describes almost nothing. We don't know whether she is beautiful or not, dark or light, good or evil, virtuous or immoral. Because our whole attention is directed toward the affective "dynamic quality" of the "glance" and the nature of the animating "genius" in the "beams," rather than their effect as static objects (contrast, for example, Rosamond Vincy's "blue flowers" in Middlemarch), the nearest thing to an image that we can envision is that she has an arresting presence, a coercive appearance. Unlike the traditional portraiture of heroines, then, this passage evokes something like pure force of character or "genius" without qualifying physical and moral specifications.

And yet the terms in which this force of character are evoked are those which have created the detailed portrayals of previous heroines: the "kind of beauty" (and the kind of desire it arouses), the "charm," and morally, the "good" or "evil genius" in "beams." So while this character is prevented by its feminine pronoun from fitting traditional standards of hero description, in which active force of character is the defining essence, she also eludes the traditional standards of heroine description, to which passive beauty and virtue are central. The syntax of the passage emphasizes her inscrutability, for the incoherence of a "she" without physical and moral details is underlined by the format of questions that is unique in Eliot's omniscient narration. It is also most unusual for the regime of circumscription that constitutes the male gaze, whose masculine judgment is rarely so tenuous: "probably," not definitely, "the evil [was dominant]."

But the next sentence, beginning a new paragraph, names a gazer. "She who raised these questions in Daniel Deronda's mind was occupied in gambling" (3). What had seemed an existential ambivalence in her because of the failure of even the omniscient narrator to pin her down, turns out to be an ambivalence in the mind of a "Daniel Deronda." His is the tentative and undecided gaze that focuses on her
masculine force of character, and his is the experience of “the wish to
look again” as “coercion” rather than “as a longing in which the whole
being consents.” Thus, the instability of gender that belonged, at first,
only to her now belongs, also, to Daniel Deronda. It is not just she who
is impenetrable, but he who is unable to penetrate. We are seeing a
reversal in the dynamic of the male gaze, in which the gazer is passively
coerced by an object that actively coerces, and in which the “unrest” is
inflicted upon the gazer instead of the object, who remains calmly
“occupied in gambling.” It is this initial reversal that paves the way for
his exercise of the heroine’s chivalric power to reform the evil (the guilt)
within the knight rather than the hero’s chivalric power to destroy the
evil (the monster or villain) that threatens the lady from outside. Thus
Daniel’s gender-reversed romance with Gwendolen, in which he acts
the inspiring conscience to her guilty nature, sets the novel in motion.

The prologue to this beginning comes in the first set of “retrospects”
that constitute our more conventionally realistic introductions to
Gwendolen and Daniel, introductions which are also explanations of
“that all-presupposing fact with which our story sets out”: the question
of gender, since as “our story” did set out—as epigraph, in other words,
yielded to narrative—fact yielded to question (“Was she beautiful?”).
Although Gwendolen thinks of herself as a “heroine” (33), a “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” (35),
this “delicate-limbed sylph of twenty meant to lead” (34, my emphasis).
However, this core of masculine ambition, we are told firmly, “dwelt
among strictly feminine furniture” (34). The narrator carefully maps out
this mixture of genders in the continuation of that “silver fork” passage
so that her feminine attributes, the seemingly innate ability to create
around her a “keeping up the forms of life,” the “breakfast-roll” and
“silver fork,” the “potent charm,” the “graceful movements,” “clear
tones,” and “beauty,” all cast her as romance heroine (35–36). Moreover,
we learn some of her psychology as well—that she is the spoiled
(coddled or abused) “eldest daughter” of a “mamma [who] had always
been in an apologetic state of mind for the evils brought on her by a
step-father” (36). This history belies, on the one hand, the generic
affiliation (since romance heroines are selfless and virtuous, rather than
“spoiled” or “selfish”), but on the other hand supports it (since they are
often the victims of the evils of stepfathers or other evil male figures).
But as the narrator warns, these feminine attributes “lie quite on the
surface” (35) and are therefore suspiciously too obvious as an explana-
tion of her ability to maintain her “domestic empire” (35). The deeper and truer explanation grows out of that conflict between the spoiled-by-mamma and the victimized-by-evil-stepfather vectors of the psychology. As the description continues, the narrator renames “evils” (abusive persecutions of Gwendolen) as “inconveniences” (obstacles to her “strong determination”) (36), thus exposing what turns out to be Gwendolen’s exaggerated representation of her stepfather’s destructiveness in order to keep her “tender, timid mother” feeling “compunctions.” Victim becomes victimizer, and we find that the energies of this stepfather dwell inside her, animating her with the “inborn energy of egoistic desire” that he holds in common with a “very common sort of men” (36). Thus, what begins as a contradiction of upbringing becomes an internal gender division, in which the male’s coercive “inborn energy of egoistic desire” takes the place of the heroine’s instinct for self-sacrifice. Since “energy of egoistic desire” can be channeled into either evil or virtuous action (and is thus the essential ingredient of masculinity, the “point of resemblance among” [36] heroes and villains) it is readily idealized, in Gwendolen’s point of view, as heroic ambition: “her ideal was to be daring in speech and reckless in braving dangers, both moral and physical” (56). Yet this ambition fits uncomfortably in “the young sylph of twenty,” as though that “common sort of man” were continually bruising himself against his “feminine furniture.” Perhaps the tidiest representations of this gender division in Gwendolen are the adjectival and adverbial tags most often used on her, “striking” and “strikingly.” (“A striking girl—that Miss Harleth—unlike others” [8]; “Since she was not winning strikingly, the next best thing to do was to lose strikingly” [7]. “She meant to do what was pleasant to herself in a striking manner; or rather, whatever she could do so as to strike others with admiration and get in that reflected way a more ardent sense of living, seemed pleasant to her fancy” [34].) “To strike” is an active verb; its action, moreover, is the very aggressive action taken not only by the unscrupulous male in order to force his weak females tremblingly to cajole and serve him, but also by the hero who slays giants and dragons. However, to be striking is to strike in “feminine furniture”: it retains only the ghost of activity, a metaphorical action that describes what is really a passive quality—singularity or distinctiveness. Gwendolen’s force of character, her strike, constitutes a fracture in gender laws and must be reduced to striking. The romance with Grandcourt, in which she occupies the heroine’s subject position, achieves this reduction by sadistically binding her with guilt, while the romance with Daniel, in which she occupies the knight’s subject position, supplies the masochis-
tic counter-structure: “One who has committed irremediable errors may be scourged by that consciousness into a higher course than is common” (420). He encourages the self-striking, the “scourg[ing]” that works to civilize, contain, tame her strike into a striking altruism.

But as we have seen, Daniel is as ambivalently gendered as Gwendolen. The forming experience of his childhood is one of feminine socialization, a feminine loss of innocence, in the oblique revelation by his tutor of his apparently dubious parentage, which renders him socially vulnerable or “tainted.” The setting for this scene is Edenic; Daniel's cloistered innocence within the garden is underlined by the literal Gothic cloister out of which this part of the Mallinger estate was constructed. Like Eve, however, Daniel will eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil while reading the history for which, the narrator tells us, he has such a “passion.” What interests him, we learn, is the hidden “history” of “how things were carried on in the dull periods” (149), and not the patriarchal, public, “legitimate” history of cataclysmic events and their heroic protagonists. And so the question he asks of his tutor (“Mr. Fraser, how was it that the popes and cardinals always had so many nephews?” [149]) is essentially personal rather than historical; it concerns the family relations hidden behind, or elided by spectacular historical events, and it expresses a desire to uncover or discover the feminine history, the illegitimate way these patriarchs filled up the “dull periods” between legitimate acts of history-making. That this hidden history is feminine history is revealed in the structure of the tutor's answer, which elides the mothers completely, hides them behind the words “illegitimate” and “marry” and effaces them in favor of the masculine “priests” and their “nephews”: “as you know very well, priests don’t marry, and the children were illegitimate” (149). Because of these elisions, Daniel can only learn feminine history in another hidden (feminine) way: the stereotypical feminine flash of intuition which goes unspoken, forbidden by the tutor's “thrusting lower lip” and the “turning to” his “political economy” (149–50). Thus the process of learning, as well as the knowledge, or the history itself, is hidden. But the most feminizing (as opposed to feminine) aspect of the whole exchange is the experience of learning what he learns, which is figured as a penetration, a phallic sting whose poison is not the shameful knowledge of papal impropriety, but the violently humiliating recognition of himself in those illegitimate children, who have no place in legitimate histories—whether familial, national, or ecclesiastical. Because he is thirteen when this scene occurs, it is quite reasonable to say that instead of initiation by, say, bar mitzvah, into patriarchal power and privilege, he is initiated
Into the mark of female difference, the (shameful) blood of puberty refigured as bastardy.

This feminizing, illegitimizing strategy prepares the way for the narrator’s description of his distinguishing personal beauty, which, like that of any romance heroine, radiates a Petrarchan holiness:

[Y]ou could hardly have seen his face thoroughly meeting yours without believing that human creatures had done nobly in times past, and might do more nobly in time to come. The finest child-like faces have this consecrating power, and make us shudder anew at all the grossness and basely-wrought griefs of the world, lest they should enter here and defile. (151)

This “consecrating power” is the heroine’s power of inspiration to “do nobly,” rather than the active heroic power of the doing. And it is peculiarly feminine in its simultaneous reminder of “grossness and basely-wrought griefs.” Like its possessor, in other words, it is fragiley and contingently virtuous: dependent upon the world to restrain itself from “entering” and “defiling”—which it never does, as the scene we are witnessing attests (151). As the description continues, his cloistered innocence is emphasized, this time accompanied by the specific comparison to “girls.” For Daniel has suffered the fate, “worse than death,” of ruined honor—his comprehension of which produces the “deep blush,” the feminine physical sign of the knowledge now entering “his mind,” whose “blending of child’s ignorance with surprising knowledge . . . is oftener seen in bright girls” (151). This femininity in Daniel makes more comprehensible the rest of his story, but before tracing out this fate and the genre in which he eventually carries it out, I would like to return to Gwendolen Harleth, whose conflicting genders and generic roles are less happily contained by the novel’s closural regime.

It is tempting to consider Gwendolen’s role in the Grandcourt plot line to be a more flamboyant version of Rosamond Vincy’s role in Middlemarch. Their vanities and pettinesses, their selfishness, their love of luxury, and their role-playing all point to such a conclusion. So, too, do the bare outlines of their stories: the pragmatic playing at romance heroine gains them good establishments that completely disappoint their expectations. But in fact, Gwendolen is a “Rosamond” turned inside out. She is completely helpless before her husband, while Rosamond engages in effective subterfuge against Lydgate on several occasions. Since Gwendolen would rather be the hero, she considers the role of romance heroine a tiresome form, a bore, which must be endured if she is to marry herself into power and freedom, while
Rosamond thinks of romance as an ideal state of happiness. Of course, cynicism always betrays a sense of injured idealism, and so even in their deeper psychologies the two characters reverse each other: while Rosamond's earnest embracing of romance dresses up a basically materialistic and pragmatic frame of reference, Gwendolen's stance of cynical materialism conceals a deeper allegiance to romance. We learn quite early that, unlike Rosamond, realistic pragmatism has never been her "native land." The narrator laments that what has "been wanting in Gwendolen's life" is a solidly realistic childhood: the "well-rooted" "tender kinship" to "the face of the earth" and "the labours that men go forth to"; "that early home" among "neighbors," the "blessed persistence" of which leads to the "sympathy" Eliot so earnestly sought to teach; and the "sweet habits of the blood" that characterize "good," moral, adult citizens (18). Gwendolen has no "sweet habits of the blood." In fact, it is even doubtful whether she has blood: her bloodless complexion is the aspect of her appearance noted most obsessively by both narrator and characters throughout the novel. (As Sir Hugo remarks, "She is certainly very graceful. But she wants a tinge of colour in her cheeks: it is a sort of Lamia beauty she has" [8].) This lack of "blessed persistence" in childhood, of blood in womanhood, and of affectionate connection to the world and its human activities, argues that she has a different native land altogether (since, despite these lacks, she is not immoral or bad).

However unromantically cynical the idea of marry Grandcourt may seem to her at first (since she marries him for wealth and position), the marriage functions as romance has functioned in other Eliot novels and as it functions in her relation to Daniel: it contains the threatening energies of the female hero. Because these energies take such virulent form in Gwendolen—the male is unscrupulous rather than altruistic (as in the cases of, for example, Dorothea Brooke or Dinah Morris), while the female cynically controls her feminine performance rather than, Rosamond-like, earnestly "acts her own character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own"—the re-gendering romance with Grandcourt takes its shape not from the chivalric tradition, but from its brutal opposite, the Gothic. Thus, in the descriptions of her anxious responses to "wide scenes" or "astronomy," the moments of "brief remembered madness" or "fits of spiritual dread," which are specified as a sense of powerlessness within and against these overwhelming vastnesses and of "exile" in an "aloof" existence. "Solitude in any wide scene impressed her with an undefined
feeling of immeasurable existence aloof from her, in the midst of which she was helplessly incapable of asserting herself” (56). When she is alone, without the mirroring audience “of human ears and eyes” (57) over whom her “unscrupulous male” can exert his “inborn energy of egoistic desire” and “win empire,” that “feminine furniture” looms dreadfully in Gothic “changes of light” (56) under which frightening pictures spring inexplicably out of the wood paneling, and the “little lot of stars” becomes a Gothic night which “set[s] her imagination at work in a way that [makes] her tremble” (56–57). These encounters with the sublime, which utterly overwhelm her “confidence,” produce in her an intuition of the dreadful and paralyzing incapacity which characterize the “chief symbol of the Gothic,” which according to Frances L. Restuccia is the “maiden in flight.”14 The aloofness and “immeasurable” “vastness” within and against which she is helpless become incarnated in Grandcourt, the Gothic “usurper of life,” clothed as the complete gentleman (as Restuccia claims the Gothic antihero of female Gothicists always is), whose face is as inscrutable, as dreadful as the “wide scene,” and who is (with the “ghostly army at his back, that could close round her wherever she might turn” [417–18]) an “immeasurable existence” before whom she is “ashamed and frightened” and “helplessly incapable of asserting herself” (55–56).15

Even before Gwendolen marries Grandcourt, however, she encounters manifestations of the Gothic world that will contain her: the hidden first wife (the Bertha Mason, the Lilith) and the Gothic space that imprisons her—Lydia Glasher and Gadsmere. The description of Gadsmere parallels that of the pastoral “country-seat” that “crowned” the munificent natural landscape of Adam Bede—but here the whole has been blackened and demonized by an almost Dickensian presentation of industrialization as Gothic. Instead of the “tall mansion” with “broad glassy pool” “taken care of” by its woods in Adam Bede, we find Gadsmere a “patchy, rambling house,” complete with “round tower,” whose grounds are “leafless,” whose “pool” is “blackly shivering” and “overhung with bushes,” whose “water-fowl” “flutter and scream.”16 The estate itself is surrounded—“guarded,” rather than “protected”—by “stony lodges which look like little prisons,” and worse, by the “black roads and black mounds which seem to put the district in mourning” (311). The whole “crackles[,]” as Judith Wilt says in another context, “with the presence of the Gothic antihero” whose property it is.17 This Gothic space that lurks within the country house (comparable to its owner’s Gothic antihero disguised as gentleman) secludes Lydia Glasher, in whom Gwendolen will recognize “the Gothic aspect of a woman’s
life”; “Gwendolen, watching Mrs. Glasher’s face while she spoke, felt a sort of terror: it was as if some ghastly vision had come to her in a dream and said, ‘I am a woman’s life’” (137). Gwendolen sees the de facto reality of her “ghastly vision,” her “fits of spiritual dread” (57), in this encounter with the hidden or elided woman that she herself will become if she succumbs to the tyrant who is pursuing her. For Lydia Glasher’s suppressed violence, revealed by her “biting accent” (137), figures the dangerous rage with which Gwendolen’s “cruel wishes” will “kill [Grandcourt] with [her] thoughts” (647), and with which her “heart” will say, “Die!” as he sinks beneath the water for the last time, because she has “held [her] hand” and not thrown the rescuing rope (648).

The place of hiddenness and its violent rage are formally bequeathed to Gwendolen on her wedding night by the cursing last will and testament of Lydia Glasher (now completely secluded—elided—since she appears only as the letter which encloses the Gothic wedding band of “poisoned gems” [330]). And it is, fittingly, through Gwendolen’s gaze that the Gothic world feminizes her in this letter-reading scene, for her “open eyes” (330), once figured as penetrators and circumscribers in the opening of the novel, have here become helpless receptacles. Through them—as she reads the letter—Lydia’s poisonous curse enters, just as Grandcourt’s “willing wrong” entered her and became hers when she “took him with her eyes open” (330). In other words, the “unscrupulous male,” whose “inborn energy of egoistic desire” prompted the choice of ambitious marriage over moral governessing, is being feminized—transformed into the guilty and terrified Gothic heroine who must now accept her inheritance and make the penance for her sin. The sudden “new spasm of terror” which makes her burn the letter, “lest accusation and proof at once should meet all eyes” (330), attests to her complicity with Grandcourt’s guilty act—most economically figured in the simultaneous making whole of Lydia and fragmentation of Gwendolen: as the “withered heart” passes from one to the other, the letter’s third-person narrative gives way to first-person assertion, and Gwendolen splinters into several “reflections of herself, like so many women petrified white” (331), like so many reiterations of the terrified woman’s role.

Later, when Grandcourt lets Gwendolen know that he knew her eyes were open, Lydia’s curse comes home. From that moment, Gwendolen will “stand before [her] husband with these diamonds on [her], and these words of [Lydia Glasher’s] in his thoughts and [hers]” (330)—trapped inside the gaze of the Gothic tyrant, whose knowledge of her guilt places her in an inescapable, internally coercive panopticon: she
cannot elude her own awareness of his awareness of her guilty knowledge and behavior. Worst of all, this panopticon is a Gothically perverted one, whose purpose is not to coerce good behavior, but wickedness. Grandcourt’s internalized watching eye is a wicked evil eye. To disobey it would be to follow the path of truth and altruism, as Deronda’s altruistic evil eye urges.

The uselessness of this altruism is demonstrated in the advice Daniel would have given Gwendolen later, in the conversation which Grandcourt’s sudden return interrupts: “The thought that urged itself foremost was—Confess everything to your husband; leave nothing concealed” (560). Obviously, this advice would not help her much, but it does help us to see that Deronda and Grandcourt really are two sides of the same patriarchal coin. Either way, it is a panopticon of male gazes which constructs and contains her as wicked, for the structure of Gothic victimization in the Grandcourt relation re-genders Gwendolen’s unscrupulous male as the hidden murderess (as his last will and testament confirms by bequeathing Gadsmere to her), while the structure of chivalric idolatry in the romance with Daniel replaces the cynically performing princess-in-exile with a male gaze that interrogates and punishes that violence, that constructs a prison for it out of her own conviction that she is guilty. Unlike previous Eliot novels, therefore, Deronda has a female hero whose re-gendering leaves her just as unmarriageable, as antidomestic, as she was at the novel’s beginning. For rather than resolving the gender ambivalence in her character, the twin romances reverse and occult its valence in order to make her a more policeable, but not more realistic, creature: the hidden murderess (who replaces the unscrupulous male) held in check by the twin altruistic and wicked male gazes (which replace the princess-in-exile as arbiters of attitude and behavior). Thus, Gwendolen’s dangerous striking energies set her on a trajectory whose outcome, like that of Medea or Antigone or any other grandly unassimilable feminine figure, can only end in the kind of exile or death found in tragedy. Before treating that closure, however, I would like to return to Daniel, who must find his own generic trajectory and undergo his own gender resolution.

To manage the desired closure for Daniel, the narrative must shift him into a generic world outside romance, one whose conventions require that its heroes possess some of the qualities that romance assigns its heroines, thus bypassing the need for any essential re-gendering scenes. Some masculine traits, however, are essential to any hero (activity, for example), and so the novel begins what we might call the activation of Daniel early—and within the standards of his already
established genre of chivalric romance. This work is managed in the judicious creation of a heroine who will complement rather than challenge his heroic possibilities. She is constituted within a gaze that might be considered an answer to the interrogatory gaze that began the novel—and, therefore, one which results in an act of rescue rather than a wish to reform.\(^9\) When Daniel first meets Mirah, she is about to drown herself and is thus presented as the quintessential damsel in distress, or, as the narrator puts it, the “impersonation of . . . misery” (171). In this scene, Daniel has been rowing but has had to pull aside to let a barge pass, all the while unconsciously singing a stanza from the Gondolier’s Song in Rossini’s *Otello* which ends with the phrase “nella miseria.” Unlike Gwendolen, the “figure” of Mirah is constituted by his projections: she is “a figure which might have been an impersonation of the misery he was unconsciously giving voice to,” a misery that is concretized into the “look of immovable, statue-like despair” with which she is regarding the river (171). This look, which begins as an activity—however “immovable” and “statue-like”—becomes an appearance by the end of the passage: “her look was something like that of a fawn” (171). In other words, Mirah’s look comes to signify passivity and objecthood—quite unlike the defiant “survey” of the “problematic sylph” who first attracted Daniel’s gaze. The same result occurs on another sensory plane: “apparently his voice had entered her inner world without her having taken any note of whence it came” (171). His voice has not only “entered” but seems to have created: the cessation of his singing makes her lose the “statue-like” “immovabl[ility]” for the first time, as though it has brought her to life and incarnated her as the misery he is singing.

Daniel’s response to this misery is typically chivalric: “He felt an outleap of interest and compassion towards her” (171–72), which causes him to fantasize a perfect Mirah in specular terms: “the picturesque lines and color of the image” and “that pale image of unhappy girlhood.” This image allows him to indulge the most romantic flights of fantasy and projection: “he fell again and again to speculating on the probable romance that lay behind that loneliness and look of desolation” (172). Once again, we encounter the double meaning of “look,” so expressive of the economy of the male gaze: her “look [expression or gaze] of desolation” is also a “look” (appearance) of “loneliness,” which the speculator can then interpret self-referentially, in an “outleap of interest and compassion.”

Of course, Daniel is more self-aware than many gazers; he “smiles at his own share in the prejudice that interesting faces must have interest-
ing adventures” (172), but then immediately “justifies himself”: “sorrow was the more tragic when it befell delicate, childlike beauty” (172)—a justification that proves to be self-referential in another way when we recall the “childlike beauty” of which he, himself, was such an extraordinary exemplar. This justification and the kind of self-recognition it brings usher in the next phase of circumscription begun by his gaze, for what was an image becomes solidified into a possession: an “onyx cameo,” in which the vivid details of “brown-black drapery,” “white face with small, small features” and “dark, long-lashed eyes” are permanently engraved (172). This cameo becomes the receptacle into which, or the mirror onto which, he can now project his own “hidden, unheeded” “girl-tragedy,” recalled in a repetition of the setting and imagery in which that earlier tragedy took place: hiddenness and unheededness (by the world, embodied before in the tutor), the “copse or hedgerow” (172) like the “Gothic cloister” and “rose petals,” and the fate of blood, “the red moment-hand of . . . death” (172). Mirah becomes the embodiment of Daniel’s tragic femininity, recast later in his specific comparison of her to his own (as yet unknown, or hidden) mother: “The agitating impression that this forsaken girl was making on him stirred a fibre that lay close to his deepest interest in the fates of women—‘perhaps my mother was like this one’” (174–75). Once he rescues her, she continues to be the perfect mirror (as her name, “Mirah,” suggests) before which his masculine identity can constitute itself. Or, as Alcharisi would say, she becomes the “instrument” (“I have after all been the instrument my father wanted” [617]) by which Daniel’s grandfather will get his wish: “Every Jew should rear his family as if he hoped that a Deliverer might spring from it” (617). For Mirah leads Daniel to Mordecai and provides the female body across which, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick might say, these two can enact their unification.20

Daniel’s relationship to Mordecai, figured at first as libidinal cathexis whose sexual energy is drained off by a female body, becomes an icon through which Daniel’s contradictory gendering is resolved—according to the generic conventions of divine scripture. Daniel and Mordecai are less bride and groom in the sexual sense than they are in the sense of apocalyptic metaphors, where gender is not essence but figure of speech (just as the church is considered metaphorically to be the bride of Christ). Mordecai’s immediate attachment to Daniel, in this generic system, is as much a divinely prophetic recognition as it is love at first sight. An example is Samuel’s recognition of the beautiful boy David, in which his libidinous attraction to David’s beauty is immediately translated into divine inspiration: “And he sent, and brought him in. Now he
was ruddy, and withal of a beautiful countenance, and goodly to look to. And the Lord said, Arise, anoint him: for this is he” (1 Samuel 16:12).

Daniel’s beauty is in the same way regrounded as an important signifier of divine favor, while Mordecai’s cathexis becomes a prophetic recognition of imminent heroic capabilities, as is clear in his imagined “second soul,” whose “face and frame must be beautiful and strong” and who “must glorify the possibilities of the Jew” (440).

The scene of his recognition performs this important task of regrounding Daniel in the metaphorics of divine scripture; it occurs, fittingly, within the dynamic of yet another gaze which replays and refigures the meeting with Mirah. Once again, Daniel is “resting on his oar” (171) in the evening when he catches sight of the figure, this time a “well-remembered face” which also catches sight of him. In this repetition, however, it is Mordecai who owns the gaze, who occupies the masculine role, who keeps the object “fast within his gaze” (459), and who, by means of the projection of desire onto that object, experiences the “sense of completion” and the “satisfaction of his longing” (460). Just as in the previous scene Mirah on the riverbank became first an image and then an ornamental possession (the onyx cameo), here Daniel’s face becomes an image, “the face of his [Mordecai’s] visions,” and then is placed, not in its actual surroundings (of boat, river, trees, setting sun), but as the “prefigured friend [who comes] from the golden background” (460) used in Byzantine religious painting to signify eternity. Proof of this higher meaning comes in Mordecai’s explanation of his expectation that Daniel would come “down the river” (460), a scene in which we see a Mordecai to whom the Lord’s messages and messengers (“angels”) are immanent presences in “earth and sky” (460), a Mordecai who holds the power of the prophet to read divine will and intention in the book of nature. In this context, Daniel as cathected beloved becomes instead a divinely chosen “second soul” (440) whose task will be to bring new life to his people by creating for them a new national self.

Daniel’s reaction to this Mordecai is reported in such a way that what is feminine in him becomes metaphorized as spiritual receptivity to the prophet’s masculine outpouring. Similar to Mirah’s unknowing perception of the “nella miseria,” he feels himself “strangely wrought upon,” so that he rejects immediately (as we are also invited to do) the “easy explanation, ‘madness,’” with which the scientific community would dismiss Mordecai’s visionary reality in favor of “a more submissive expectancy” to which this visionary reality is not hallucination but “fulness and conviction” of “consciousness” “where his own was blank.” Thus playing on the image of masculine fulness and feminine blankness,
the narrator can characterize Daniel’s “nature” as female receptacle ready to conceive: “His nature was too large, too ready to conceive regions beyond his own experience, to rest at once in the easy explanation, ‘madness’” (461).

This feminine receptivity is converted into spiritual readiness—“that rare and massive power, like fortitude” (463)—a conversion the narrator effects by revealing Mordecai’s essential function in the novel: “[This] claim brought with it a sense of solemnity which seemed a radiation from Mordecai . . . as if he had been that preternatural guide seen in the universal legend, who suddenly drops his mean disguise and stands a manifest Power” (461). We are moving into epic and myth, the world of the universal legend, in which disguised deities descend to earth in order to guide and teach the hero/protagonist. And it is not only Greek and Latin epic (Athene disguised as Mentor in The Odyssey, for example) that exhibits this important function; the Old Testament also contains such teacher/guides (the angel of the Lord who teaches Abraham to substitute animal for human sacrifice, for example), and in the New Testament, Christ’s poverty and his teachings (especially the idea that to succor the poor and outcast is to succor Him) are refractions of this tradition. More recent epic poetry also retains this figure: Virgil’s shade in The Divine Comedy and the angels Raphael and Michael in Paradise Lost. Thus Daniel’s receptivity becomes not that of a mistress, but that of the epic hero, the Telemachus, Abraham, apostle, Dante, or Adam whose extraordinary feats are guided by these “manifest Powers” (461).

Yet, as the narrator explains, Daniel still lacks “belief in the validity of Mordecai’s impressions concerning him” (463), since he still believes that he is not Jewish and, therefore, that he is empirically incapable of carrying out the Zionist project Mordecai so confidently places before him. Of course, once he meets his mother and learns that he is Jewish, this remaining obstacle is removed. But the scene with Daniel’s mother serves another important function as well. For she, like Mordecai, is an extraordinary and unrealistic presence—so extraordinary that the fullness of her impact comes rather from the mythic purpose she serves than the realistic one of simple revelation of parentage. She bequeaths more to Daniel than this knowledge or the chest of his grandfather’s documents, although these, too, are important epic indicators (our hero is of noble birth, for example, and from a lineage of leaders). She gives him something in her own right, for she is another necessary figure in the quest of the epic hero: the oracle. Iconographically, she recalls the veiled oracular female figures in antiquity (and in Romanticism—
Keats’s “Moneta” and “Mnemosyne” from the *Hyperion* fragments, for example), whose faces and figures present the enigma of fate. Her inner world is inconceivable: Daniel cannot “conceive what sort of manifestation her feeling demanded,” nor “even conjecture in what language she would speak to him” (582–83). Indeed, unrepresentability (in language) seems to constitute her essence as her figure continuously escapes Daniel’s attempts to fix it in language. Yet, the mystery lies not so much in the unconjecturable language she will speak, but in the language that she is already speaking: the “play of the brow and nostril which made a tacit language” (582). She speaks the unspoken and perhaps unspeakable (“tacit”) language which expresses not individual or human feeling but signifies only the principle of mutability. Her gaze is thus doubly powerful because she is at once examining and unexaminable: “his chief consciousness was that her eyes were piercing and that her face so mobile that the next moment she might look like a different person” (583). This is a powerful matriarchal heritage for the femininity in Daniel—at least as powerful as the patriarchal legacy of the box of documents he receives from his grandfather. And it heals both aspects of Daniel’s original wounding socialization: the shames of illegitimacy and of femininity since he is not, after all, illegitimate, and femininity is given this power of its own. This grand “maternal transference of self” (463) completes Daniel’s endowment in the great generic scope he will need for the successful undertaking of his epic purpose. All that remains for him to do now is free himself from his Dido.

Plenty of critics have seen Daniel as a Victorian Aeneas, but none of them examine sufficiently the meaning of this subject position to the Dido, the heroine of the romance he occupies with Gwendolen, or what this relationship means for the form of the novel. For with the parting of Daniel and Gwendolen, the novel enacts a generic bifurcation into tragedy and epic, “the difference of native language” (746) across which their scene of parting takes place. Georg Lukács has given us a helpful vocabulary for understanding the different languages of epic and tragedy in the analytic comparison he makes in *The Theory of the Novel*: “great epic writing gives form to the extensive totality of life, drama to the intensive totality of essence”; thus, “the character created by drama . . . is the intelligible ‘I’ of man, the character created by the epic is the empirical ‘I.’” In this case, Daniel embodies the “extensive totality of life” in his national ambitions, which Gwendolen experiences as a total abandonment, as the “intensive totality of essence” of existential loneliness. (Lukács earlier identifies “loneliness” as “the very essence of tragedy.”) The words Daniel uses in explaining his ideas to her—“the
idea that I am possessed with is that of restoring a political existence to my people, making them a nation again, giving them a national centre, such as the English have, though they too are scattered over the face of the globe” (747)—express not so much a personal grandiosity, as this Lukácsian totality. Existence is an abstract concept, a totalization of concrete living; “nation” totalizes “my people”; and “globe,” in its turn, totalizes “nations.” Aeneas-like, he presents his ambition under a cloak of pious humility: the titanic “idea . . . of restoring a political existence to my people” is a “duty,” which he is “resolved to begin . . . however feebly,” and to which he will “devote [his] life” (747), but behind the humility lies the idealized empirical “I,” who will “glorify the possibilities of the Jew.” For if Daniel succeeds in “awaken[ing] a movement in other minds,” he will become, like Aeneas or Moses, a symbolic figure to his people of themselves as a nation, the story of whose epic task will be their history.

Gwendolen’s reaction to this totalized epic world, in which she has no place, is a recurrence of “spiritual dread” in the face of an even vaster, more aloof, more sublime universe:

There was a long silence between them. The world seemed getting larger round poor Gwendolen, and she more solitary and helpless in the midst. The thought that he might come back after going to the East, sank before the bewildering vision of these wide-stretching purposes in which she felt herself reduced to a mere speck. (747)

She experiences the tragic anagnorisis—the ironic recognition—of the striking woman: not that she, Oedipus-like, has been the source and cause of her own and her community’s undoing, but that she has, after all, been ultimately insignificant, an elision—“reduced to a mere speck”—in the forward march of legitimately significant patriarchal history, which inexorably and necessarily “strikes” her from its text (like Lydia Glasher, like Alcharisi, and like the elided mistresses of Daniel’s popes and cardinals who “had so many nephews”). As the scene continues, she is fixed in this tragic world, as the narrator’s description of her reaction makes clear. Her melodramatically stylized “attitude” (dilated eyes, stretched out arms, visible trembling—more typical of Dickens than of Eliot [749]) places Gwendolen on stage and freezes her into spectacle: she embodies forsakenness, much as Mirah seemed a “statue-like” “incarnation of misery” in her first appearance. Indeed, she is once again paralyzed as the “statue into which a soul of Fear had entered” (54) that we saw her become when the wood panel flew open and exposed its frightening figure. Here, the memory of a dead face
transfixes her—not the unfixed signifier of dread revealed in the wood panel, but the very palpable and specific recollection of her own crime. Grandcourt’s dead face, at which she looks here “with dilated eyes, as at something lying in front of her,” becomes the sign of her “cruelty” and the reason for her “forsakenness” (749). Thus she is not only objectified as tableau, but she is also imprisoned within a piteous and terrifying subjective vision of tragically inescapable guilt. Fixed from within and from without in this “intensive totality of essence,” she will remain the novel’s tragic figure, the scapegoat, whose death or exile allows the getting on with life in the community, figured here as the forward march of Daniel’s monumental vocation.

The novel, then, refuses the traditional realistic closure, the marriage to which the romantic energy generated between these two characters ought to lead, by splitting itself into the two antithetical closures of epic and tragedy. Realistic domesticity has reached its limit: it cannot contain in stable combination—that is to say, in private marriage—the rapidly diverging energies of the public, national, and epic search for the true beginning and the tragic existential suppression of coercive genius (good or evil), the quenching of those “beams” “with which our story sets out”—which made, in fact, “our story” possible at all. Thus, in the closing gestures there is less a domestication of the grand scope than something like a sacralizing of the domestic, as prefigured in the description of Sir Hugo Mallinger’s stables, for as the epic sails off with its happiness, it comprehends within its greater transcendence the comparatively smaller happiness of realistic domesticity: the promise of Daniel’s epic fulfillment includes for him two marriages—the wedding with Mirah, in which he is the bridegroom, and the death of Mordecai, in relation to whom he has always been figured as the bride. Realistic marital closure helps support the heroic enterprise, but the true closural transcendence has been reserved for the greater spiritual Weltanschauung expressed by Mordecai’s paraphrase of Ruth 1:16, his dying utterance “in Hebrew [of] the Divine Unity, which for generations has been on the lips of the dying Israelite” (754), and the narrator’s closing quotation from Samson Agonistes.

Meanwhile, there is poor Gwendolen fixed in her tableau of tragic dread, reduced to a “mere speck.” She has no script but that of the tragic scapegoat, since the domestic closure of wifehood, given in other Eliot novels to the romance heroines, has here been figuratively handed to the hero—as we recall, Daniel’s status as hero does not come from any purging or suppressing of his femininity, but by means of it: via his massive receptivity. Considered in larger terms, the novel had to mine
the feminine to create this “androgy nous” hero, a procedure begun in the opening scene, when Daniel initiated Gwendolen’s “striking losses” by absorbing her “goddess’s” power into his “evil eye,” and completed at plot level in these two marriages. However, just as the marriage trope put some realistic flesh onto that epic closure, an infusion of realism — here, plausibility — will temper Gwendolen’s tragedy. In its final pages, the narrative follows her to bed the night of Daniel’s revelation, where it commutes the tragic sentence of death or exile to one of liminal life. Not married, not dead, not exiled, and quite sane, she will live out a plausible tragedy, figured as a role-less and repetitious exile and an end-less bettering: “I am going to live,” she repeats to her mother, “I shall live. I mean to live,” and in the morning, “I shall live. I shall be better” (751), and finally from off-stage, in her note to Daniel on his wedding day, “It is better — it shall be better with me because I have known you” (754). Here, then, is Gwendolen, like the covered Alcharisi speaking through her agonizing illness and the secluded Lydia Glasher in her last will and testament, speaking in a letter whose self-sacrificial reassurances are compelled by that panopticon of policing gazes. In this fate, we see the last example in Eliot’s novels of that simultaneous presence of feminist analysis and retrogressive plots with which feminists have been struggling for decades. It seems to me that the analysis of genre provides the key to this apparent paradox, for it shows us unequivocally that the feminist analysis really inheres in the plots, that the constriction of feminine potential is intentionally played out there, in a clear illustration of what Eliot calls in the prelude to Middlemarch “the social lot of women”: that it was only in masculine scripts that they could find a venue for their potential, and that the requirements of Victorian gender arrangements, enacted in the plots and re-gendering regimes that work to produce the traditional domestic closures of realistic fiction, required an elision of that scope. The novels recount this process with increasing discomfort until this most emphatic articulation of it closes a novel in which the striking female heroes are confined not just in marriage but also in specks of insignificance.

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NOTES

Gender, Genre, and Realism in Daniel Deronda


4 This idea of the male gaze originates with feminist film theory. Laura Mulvey’s foundational essays on what she calls “fetishistic” and “active” “scopophilia” can be found in Feminism and Film Theory, ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 1988), 57–68, 69–79. Nancy Miller translates the theory into a literary context in her reading of Madame de Stael’s Corinne, in which she says the heroine is made to see “as a woman,” rather than as an artist by the hero’s gaze (Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1988], 168–69).


6 Miller, xi, ix.

7 Middlemarch, 658 (“systole and diastole”).

8 Middlemarch, 294.

9 A complete study of the techniques and clichés of heroine description can be found in Helena Michie, The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women’s Bodies (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987).


11 As with Will Ladislaw, there is a venerable critical history of abusing Daniel’s effeminacy. Recently, however, Margaret Moan Rove has taken a more serious look at this issue. In “Melting Outlines in Daniel Deronda,” Studies in the Novel 22 (1990): 10–18, she argues, as I do, that Deronda’s ambivalent gender has an important function in the novel: it is one “melting outline” that figures others (between Jew and Christian and between the narrative modes of realism and romance, for example).

12 For example, in Becoming a Heroine: Reading about Women in Novels (New York: Viking, 1982). Rachel Brownstein considers Gwendolen to be a Rosamond presented with “sympathy” (215); Judith Wilt remarks incisively: “Having . . . discovered in her characterization of Rosamond her own ambiguous antipathy to and anxiety for the classic English murdering beauty, Eliot set out to rescue her in Daniel Deronda” (Ghosts of the Gothic: Austen, Eliot, and Lawrence [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1987], 209); and Gillian Beer notes that “George Eliot makes restitution to those earlier figures such as Hetty and Rosamond excluded from her full sympathy because they could never succeed in fully sympathising with others,” in George Eliot (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1986), 219.
Sarah Gates
relationship between Daniel and Mordecai as a “marriage,” which “elevates the
‘masculine’ search for vocation by conflating it with a ‘feminine’ instinct for love through
the ‘marriage’ of two male characters” (403). She sees Mordecai and Daniel as
occupying shifting genders—although in her reading Mordecai seems, in the main, to
occupy the feminine role.

28 Critical opinion is divided about this ending for Gwendolen: most, including Judith
Wilt, Ghosts, and “He Would Come Back: The Fathers of the Daughters in Daniel
Deronda,” Nineteenth-Century Literature 42 (1987): 313–38; Christine Sutphen, “Femi-
nine Passivity and Rebellion in Four Novels by George Eliot,” Texas Studies in
Language and Literature 29 (1987): 342–63; and Gillian Beer read its unscriptedness as
an opening into opportunity, freedom, or independence for her. Others, like Roslyn
tional Journal of Women’s Studies 4 (1981): 472–63; and Deirdre David see it as her
ultimate punishment or destruction. In “Who Killed Gwendolen Harleth?: Daniel
Deronda and Keats’s ‘Lamia,’” JEGP 87 (1988): 35–48, Timothy Pace also finds that
Daniel reduces Gwendolen’s potentiality: “Once Deronda declares Gwendolen destined
to be good, the novel deconstructs what it has all along used to represent her potentiality
for self-affirmation, an acceptance of the open-ended mingling of good and evil” (45).
We both disagree with Zim, who writes that when “released from the curse of Mrs.
Glasher’s diamonds, she begins to grow anew into the menschlich Wesen who can write
to Deronda on his wedding day, acknowledging her gratitude for his help and her
former selfishness” (230).

29 I use quotation marks around the term “androgy nous” to put pressure on it in
Adrienne Rich’s sense: as a term, it enacted exactly the appropriation of the feminine that
I am claiming for the creation of Daniel.

30 Middlemarch, 4.