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LEGITIMATE PLOTS, PRIVATE LOTS IN *FELIX HOLT* AND *DANIEL DERONDA*

By Bonnie Shannon McMullen

A preoccupation with the idea of home was central to George Eliot's fiction from its beginnings until its end. In *Felix Holt* and *Daniel Deronda*, however, this theme is developed in terms that involve legal complexities that have embroiled her characters, perplexed her readers, and sent the author to seek advice and reassurance from the barrister Frederic Harrison. Esther Lyon has a 'right in remainder' in a property, while Harold Transome has 'a reversion tantamount to possession' (p. 284), Sir Hugo Mallinger is a tenant for life, his nephew Grandcourt a tenant in tail. These intricacies of plot have puzzled and annoyed many readers and critics, including F. R. Leavis, who, with respect to *Felix Holt*, declared the technical elaboration 'perversely ... misdirected', demanding 'of the reader a strenuousness of attention that, if he is an admirer of George Eliot, he is unwilling to devote'.² Assuming that Leavis did not mean to imply that non-admirers *would* be prepared to devote such attention, we might still ask, what aspects of Eliot's writing do not require varying degrees of strenuous attention. Is it not her ability, which no novelist of her own period equals, and few before or since come near, to hold us as readers in a high state of alert, as we follow the delicate nuances of her balanced prose and subtle reasoning and weigh the implications of her erudite allusions, that keeps discussion of her work alive? Rather than assume that, in designing these difficult plots, Eliot suffered a lapse of judgement, perhaps we should allow the possibility that she was fully in control of her art, and even accept the compliment she extends us by assuming our ability to keep our footing on some fairly steep paths. Great authors make, as well as find, their readers.

Fred C. Thomson has explicated the details of the settlement with great clarity in his article 'The Legal Plot in *Felix Holt*'.³ By the time Eliot consulted Harrison, she had written a substantial part of the novel, and had already decided on the relations between her characters with respect to property and ownership. She was justifiably worried about the law of limitations, however, which could have nullified Esther's claim to Transome Court. Harrison himself could, at first, see no way around this problem, and, in order to grasp the fictional situation more fully, he became one of a very few people ever to read part of an Eliot manuscript before publication. He then came up with the idea of a settlement and base fee, which means that the Bycliffe claim to the property does not take effect as long as the settlor has living descendants.

As he took up the task with gusto, Harrison supplied Eliot with elaborate outlines, exceeding his brief by filling out details about the moral traits and health of the principal actors. He even consulted Farrer Herschell, later Baron Herschell, Lord Chancellor under Gladstone, adding another layer of legal expertise to the background of *Felix Holt*. One particular pet project of Harrison's was to make Esther not only a Bycliffe, but also a Transome, but when he realised that doing so would negate rather than reinforce her claim, he then revised his legal scheme. Eliot, who had no intention of allowing this almost too helpful barrister to write her novel for her, tactfully replied on 31 January 1866 that she would 'retain the point for consideration', but felt a 'disinclination to adopt this additional coincidence' which would take the story 'out of the track of ordinary probability'.⁴ Her decision to adopt Harrison's suggestion of a settlement,

however, did mean that she had to create a living descendant of Thomas Transome, and, as this descendant was not to be the father of Esther or Annette, as Harrison had proposed, she had to create a new character who was almost certainly not part of the original plan. Thus was born Tommy Trounsem, who, as Fred C. Thomson has argued, justifies his position in the novel on more than structural grounds.⁵

Leavis asserts that Eliot 'misjudged in trying to use a popular mode of Victorian fictioneering for her own purposes'.⁶ Thomson concludes that Eliot's 'adherence' to Harrison's plan 'caused the essentials of her plot to be confused with the accidentals, and her purpose to be blurred'.⁷ This 'purpose', he identifies as 'determinism, tragically conceived as "hereditary, entailed Nemesis"'.⁸ 'Hereditary, entailed Nemesis' is a phrase from 'Notes on the Spanish Gypsy and Tragedy in General',⁹ and certainly indicates one of Eliot's preoccupations at this time, but is it truly applicable to *Felix Holt*? The Nemesis that hangs over Mrs Transome is not hereditary, but of her own making, and more bitter for that. Furthermore, although her suffering is vividly dramatised, arguably she is happier after the débacle of the revelation to Harold that he is Jermyn's son than she was before, living in guilt and fear of such a disclosure, just as Rufus Lyon is happier once he has revealed Esther's paternity. Furthermore, Harold's own suffering awakens him to an understanding of his mother's position and transforms a formal relationship, barren for Harold and painful for Mrs Transome, into one of mutual sympathy. Jermyn's downfall, again, is self-made, the result of years of calculating dishonesty and exploitation. Although the often confining and destructive powers of hereditary conditions are constantly evoked, in nearly every important instance the characters defy them. Felix refuses to continue his father's quack-medicine business, Esther renounces a family estate to live in poverty with a man she loves, and Harold, who has shown more energy and enterprise than his Durfey-Transome 'father', resolves to overcome the legacy of his natural parentage also: '... with a proud insurrection against the hardship of an ignominy which was not of his own making, he inwardly said, that if the circumstances of his birth were such as to warrant any man in regarding his character of gentleman with ready suspicion, that character should be the more strongly asserted in his conduct. No one should be able to allege with any show of proof that he had inherited meanness' (p. 382). Far from being a dramatisation of hereditary Nemesis, the movement of *Felix Holt*, from autumn through winter to spring, is comic/pastoral. 'Holt' means 'grove' or 'copse'. 'Felix holt' is a happy grove.

Many critics have wondered at Eliot's decision to make the name of Felix the title, and therefore, the symbolic centre of this novel, especially in view of Fred C. Thomson's demonstration that Arabella Transome and Transome Court were her initial starting points.¹⁰ Throughout the book, however, the happy grove stands as an alternative to, and ultimately supersedes, the Dantesque image of the 'dolorous enchanted forest in the under world' (p. 11), Mrs Transome's reality, evoked in the introduction. Already, in the first chapter, Harold plans to cut down some of the trees his mother has left untouched. Holding 'every tree sacred' (p. 20), is to ignore the necessary balance between nature and nurture, between reverence for the past and provision for the future. As Harold later explains to Esther, thinning the trees 'would give an idea of extent that is lost now'. 'I should think it would be an improvement. One likes a "beyond" everywhere' (p. 342), Esther replies with enthusiasm. Even Transome Court is capable of a brief transformation from 'dolorous ... forest' to happy grove, as happens in Chapter XLIII when the eventual heir, the exuberant young Harry, 'like a great tropic bird',

plays joyously in its pillared hall with the 'swallow-tailed' orphan, Job, while two pet squirrels perch on the statue of Silenus and Bacchus and peep down from 'stuccoed angels on the ceiling' (pp. 352-53). As Mrs Holt and Mr Transome look on, youth and age, East and West, rich and poor, Christian and pagan, classical and modern, meet in a natural moment of simple human fun. Continuing the woodland theme, Esther is later compared to 'a white new-winged dove' that 'could not find its home' (p. 393) in Transome Court. With Felix, she becomes a laughing 'morning thrush' (p. 396).

It is doubtful whether speaking of a work of fiction, or any other form of art, as having a purpose is a very helpful approach. Eliot herself wrote to Edward Burne-Jones in 1873, 'Don't you agree with me that much superfluous stuff is written on all sides about purpose in art?' (*Letters*, V, 391). We might, more usefully, enquire what preoccupations emerge from the language and plot, what further questions and impressions are left with us as readers. One such consideration is that the legal discourse, with which the rich and their agents plan the futures of unknown generations with their wills and settlements, is a different language from that of the narrator or characters of the novel. It is a language, like that of religious inquiry, which must be translated before it can be understood by ordinary people. Those who hold the key to legal language, 'this cursed conjuring secret of theirs called Law' (p. 182), as Christian puts it, are in a position of power not only over the opponents of their clients, but over their clients themselves, demonstrated by Jermyn's tyranny over the Transomes. Indeed, as men like Jermyn use the money they accumulate by exploiting the landed classes to acquire land in turn, they displace those who were initially their clients. The novel divides between the landed and the unlanded, landlords and tenants. Land ownership is a prerequisite for social standing, economic power, and direct participation in the political process. As the novel demonstrates, however, the dispositions made by the landed classes make it difficult for many of their number to say, without qualifications, that they own their own houses. They are as vulnerable to changes in fortune as any poor man. As the dispossessed Tommy Trousem puts it, 'There's folks born to property, and there's folks catch hold on it; and the law's made for them as catch hold' (p. 231).

However, there is another, and large, sense of ownership which arises less from legal title than from a long association, particularly childhood memories. Mr Wace, the brewer, expresses the ordinary man's point of view when he argues, 'There isn't a greater pleasure than doing a bit of planting and improving one's buildings, and investing one's money in some pretty acres of land ... land you've known from a boy' (pp. 175-76) and later, refusing to sell, declares 'It's mine into the bowels of the earth and up to the sky. I can build the Tower of Babel on it if I like ...' (p. 181). Even the unsentimental Harold Transome exclaims upon returning to his childhood home, 'Ah, there's the old river I used to fish in. I often thought, when I was at Smyrna, that I would buy a park with a river through it as much like the Lapp as possible' (p. 20). Esther's decision to renounce her inheritance is largely made because of her reluctance to force the Transomes from their 'old home' (p. 358), feeling an increasing 'repugnance to turning [Harold] out of anything he had expected to be his, or to snatching anything from him on the ground of an arbitrary claim' (p. 389). Although Esther has long dreamt of riches, when the reality draws near she is forced to imagine 'what it would be to disturb a long possession, and how difficult it was to fix a point at which the disturbance might begin, so as to be contemplated without pain' (p. 321). Interestingly, in the clash between the legal and equitable

ownership of property dramatised by Esther's dilemma, and her sensitivities towards the occupants of her newly-inherited property, Eliot has anticipated developments in property case law in the late twentieth century, resulting in a situation where courts are increasingly willing to recognise equitable rights, regardless of legal title. An equitable right to property must also be grounded in a language-based understanding. Felix is right to insist upon literacy as a prerequisite for the working man's exercise of rights in his own land, England. Deronda learns Hebrew to master his new task of establishing a Jewish homeland.

It is said that a bemused Canadian Indian chief, upon hearing a British official declare his ancestral tribal hunting grounds Crown property, inquired 'If this is your land, where are your stories?'¹¹ By this ownership test, the Transome claim to Transome Court is indisputable, while Esther has no claim whatever. In *Daniel Deronda*, the story that connects the Jews to the 'East' is the foundation myth of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the most compelling story of western civilisation. In both cases, rival, untold stories exist, the stories of the tenant farmers of the Transomes, who have worked the land they live on for generations, the stories of those who have inhabited the East since the Jewish diaspora. These stories, subversive to the order of both novels, are only implied. The time for their hearing has not come. They cannot be absorbed by the plots of the antagonists or the plot of the novelist, but their submerged power suggests an evolving afterlife for the stories that are played out within the time frames of *Felix Holt* and *Deronda*.

In this interconnected world, the plots of the rich for the disposal of their plots of ground have a determining effect for the smaller 'lots' of the poor. Eliot plays with the spatial implications of 'lot', as an indicator of position and opportunity, but a close examination shows a topsy-turvy hierarchy where the supposedly privileged Mrs Transome endures the 'monotomous narrowing life which used to be the lot of our poorer gentry' (p. 26), following 'the narrow track of her own lot, wide only for a woman's anguish' (p. 278). Mr Lyon, who occupies a tiny space behind a 'wall of books' (p. 325) lives a wide and happy life in the certainty of inheritance of a heavenly home. Esther's reversal of fortune forces her to consider her 'lot': 'After all, she was a woman, and could not make her own lot Her lot is made for her by the love she accepts' (p. 341). She resolves that it will not be the 'middling lot' (p. 356) of a life with Harold Transome.

It is a short step from 'lots' to 'lotteries'. Mrs Transome's desire for the death of her eldest son so that Harold will inherit has turned her life into 'a hideous lottery', where 'day after day, year after year, had yielded blanks' (p. 22). This image leads directly to the thematic concerns of *Daniel Deronda*, where an actual lottery is described in the memorable opening chapter, and where the financial lotteries that determine the rise and fall of family fortunes have placed Gwendolen and her family in such a vulnerable position. Lacking the stability, moral and social, that an established home would have given her, Gwendolen, without love, marries into the supposed security of landed interests just as Mrs Transome has done. Even aristocratic standing is no guarantee of a roof, however, as Gwendolen soon learns. Sir Hugo, who has no sons, needs to make legal arrangements with his nephew Grandcourt so that his wife and daughters will have a home once Grandcourt inherits Topping Abbey. Deronda, who is believed to be Sir Hugo's illegitimate son, will be left with no inherited home. Lydia Glasher's son by Grandcourt should inherit his property, but will be displaced by any legitimate son who may

spring from Grandcourt's marriage to Gwendolen. Once again, these complicated relationships sent Eliot to weighty law tomes and to Frederic Harrison, who again obliged with detailed advice.

While the rich consult their lawyers and engage in mutual mistrust and suspicion as they seek to consolidate and extend their wealth, others, less privileged materially, escape the trap of inherited lots and lotteries. Mrs Meyrick and her daughters enjoy a 'wide-glancing, nicely-select life, open to the highest things' inside their 'grim-walled slice of space in ... London',¹² where they offer sanctuary to Mirah, whose house and neighbourhood have been pulled down. With no inheritance but their faith and a traditional set of values, the hospitable Cohens share a loving family life in their cramped quarters behind the pawn shop, making available a space for Mordecai to engage in his fertile intellectual and spiritual pursuits in their tiny back room.

Daniel Deronda explores the variations of the theme of the immorality of making one's own good out of the misfortune of others, which is the essence of a lottery. Gwendolen, who has displaced Mrs Glasher by her marriage to Grandcourt, later comes to fear that she will be responsible for turning Deronda out of his boyhood home, a home he loves and knows 'every cranny of' (p. 362). Deronda, however, has no qualms about eventually leaving Topping Abbey for good: 'I carry it with meTo most men their early home is no more than a memory of their early years, and I'm not sure but they have the best of it. The image is never marred. There's no disappointment in memory...' (p. 362).

Deronda's internalisation of his home, which enables him to be at home wherever he is, is his qualification for his vocation in the East, where he will seek a homeland for his people. This project would seem to carry him as far as possible from the lives 'rooted in the common earth' (p. 43) who are the subject of *Felix Holt*, but, in fact, far from being a repudiation of this focus, Deronda's mission is an endorsement. Paradoxically, it is the intensity of his tie to Topping Abbey, where he has memorised 'every line' (p. 361) of the carved foliage of the capitals in the courtyard, that has given him the rootedness necessary to balance the abstractions of Mordecai's vision, to demonstrate through his life work how root and branch relate, how common earth and sky are the common home for all. Sadly, neither Deronda nor his creator seems to have considered that the realisation of Mordecai's vision, like the realisation of Esther's daydreams, will 'disturb a long possession'.

Although I disagree with Thomson's view that Eliot caused a confusion of accidentals with essentials in *Felix Holt*, his terms of reference are useful. For what the plots of *Felix Holt* and *Daniel Deronda* actually demonstrate is the possible ways that characters can override accidentals and make their own destinies, in defiance of what the law dictates, and achieve a higher morality. Even Gwendolen eludes the dead hand of Grandcourt's will by refusing to replace Mrs Glasher at Gadsmere but choosing instead to return to her family. To live solely according to the dispositions of past generations or the consequences of one's earlier wrong decisions, is to live like Mrs Transome, so afraid to thin the trees that no 'beyond' is possible.

To live in the forest of the past is to settle for confinement and confusion, but to apprehend the 'beyond' requires a place to stand. In Eliot's writing, this place, or property, becomes increasingly abstract as selfhood is conceived in terms of mental and emotional, rather than physical, property. As Peter Brooks put it in *Reading for the Plot*, 'the question of what we are

typically must pass through the question of where we are¹³ Together, these questions lead to a preoccupation with process and change, reflected in the occupations and predilections of Eliot's major characters. Felix is a watchmaker with his eye on time, and Deronda has 'a passion for history' (p. 139). A 'long-tailed saurian' (p. 83) like Sir Maximus Debarry will become extinct, like any creature unable to adapt to change.

The plot of a novel may be seen as marking its physical parameters, the space within which its story evolves, just as a plot of land defines the starting place for a life, 'some spot of a native land' where 'a human life' can be 'well rooted' (*Deronda*, p. 16). The legal plots of the rich and powerful are to a large extent in *Felix Holt*, and a lesser extent in *Daniel Deronda*, an attempt to control the effects of time and change, to preserve an order that advantages the privileged and their progeny. A novel's plot, the boundaries of a homestead, a legal scheme for the passing of real estate, all are frameworks which, by their nature, can contain, but not control, the development of what grows within them. Just as Deronda dreads 'turning himself into a sort of diagram instead of a growth which can exercise the guiding attraction of fellowship' (p. 447), so the novelist's work is to give dynamic life to what is contained by the diagrammatic plot. As the characters move within the framework created by the legal intricacies that are the givens, the limiting conditions of their lives, they imitate the author who makes life within the limitations of her plot. Here, as Sampson says in the Introduction to *Felix Holt*, are 'fine stories' (p. 10), stories that make the vital connection between a person or a people with home or homeland.

Notes

- 1 *Felix Holt, The Radical*, ed. Fred C. Thomson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 282. Subsequent quotations from *Felix Holt* will be indicated by page references in the text.
- 2 *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), p. 50.
- 3 *Studies in English Literature*, 7 (1967), 691-704.
- 4 *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1954-78), IV, 231. Subsequent quotations from the letters will be indicated by volume and page references in the text.
- 5 'The Legal Plot in *Felix Holt*', p. 704.
- 6 'Introduction', *Felix Holt, The Radical* (London: Everyman's Library, 1996), p. x.
- 7 'The Legal Plot in *Felix Holt*', p. 704.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 692.
- 9 *George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals*, ed. J. W. Cross, 3 vols (New York: Harper, 1885), III, 32.
- 10 'The Genesis of *Felix Holt*', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 16 (1961), 47-58.

- 11 Lecture by Ken Wiwa, 'Land Rights: "If this is your land, where are your stories?"', Thirteenth Annual Oxford Amnesty Lecture, Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford, 10 Feb 2005.
- 12 Ed. Graham Handley (Oxford: OUP, 1988), p. 167. Subsequent quotations from *Daniel Deronda* will be indicated by page numbers in the text.
- 13 (Oxford: OUP, 1984), p. 6.