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# Handling George Eliot's Fiction

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An argument that George Eliot was a novelist intellectually, philosophically, and aesthetically ahead of the majority of her peers thankfully needs no defense two hundred years after her birth. This lofty status, however, does not mean that Eliot was impervious to the cultural preoccupations of her time. Quite the contrary. A central contention of this essay is that Eliot, despite her imposing intellectual reputation, engaged with her culture's popular interest in human hands in ways that profoundly affected her fiction. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> the Victorians became highly cognizant of the physicality of their hands in large part because unprecedented developments in mechanized industry and new advancements in evolutionary theory made them the first culture to experience a radical disruption of this supposedly age-old, God-given, "distinguishing" mark of their humanity. Eliot did not write any "industrial" novels per se, and so it may be fair to assume that she was relatively unmoved by the human hand's supersession by mechanized industry. And though she was not religious in any

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1. See Peter J. Capuano, "Introduction: The Half-Lives of Hands," in *Changing Hands: Industry, Evolution, and the Reconfiguration of the Victorian Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 1-16.

traditional sense, she definitely maintained a keen interest in the rapidly changing scientific paradigms of her day. This scientific interest, as we shall see, plays an unusually interesting—and as of yet unconsidered—role in the development of her characters' bodies.

In 1844, Robert Chambers anonymously published *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*—one of the first English works to popularize a theory of what was known as “The Development Hypothesis.”<sup>2</sup> Because the text was published anonymously, *Vestiges* had many detractors in the conservative and established scientific community. Nonetheless, criticism of the book seemed only to publicize and to increase its popularity. The more *Vestiges* “was dissected at public scientific meetings, [and] and condemned from pulpits and lecture platforms,” the more it was “borrowed from circulating libraries and read.”<sup>3</sup> A passage that would have been particularly alarming to this wider audience that was already reeling from the supersession of manual labor in factories was the text's assertion that “human hands, and other features grounded on by naturalists as characteristic ... do not differ more from the simiadae than the bats do from the lemurs.”<sup>4</sup> Chambers' use of the double negative, here, jumbles (perhaps consciously) his more jarring point that the human hand shares its structure with primates and may not have been so exceptionally characteristic of humans after all.

By 1857, when Casimir D'Arpentigny published *La Science de la main* (*The Science of the Hand*), readers on both sides of the English Channel became transfixed by the notion that “the hand had its physiognomy like the face.”<sup>5</sup> Popular works that were filled with various disquisitions on the hand as a site of authenticity became all the more

2. Robert Chambers, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, edited by James A. Secord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

3. James A. Secord, *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of “Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation”* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 37. Charles Dickens, for instance, in his contributions to *All the Year Round* and in the structural thematics of *Great Expectations* (1860–1861), is quite profoundly interested in new Darwinian evolutionary paradigms. See Capuano, *Changing Hands*, Chapter 5: “The Evolutionary Moment in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*,” 127–151.

4. Chambers, *Vestiges*, 266.

5. Casimir D'Arpentigny, *The Science of the Hand* (1857), translated and edited by Edward Heron-Allen (London: Ward and Lock, 1886), 184.

visible—and vexed—with the arrival of the first gorilla to the British Zoological Society in 1858. Amidst this atmosphere of heightened interest in the hand, the effect of the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) can not be overestimated. One of the very few passages containing explicit reference to human beings in the *Origin* discusses (with considerably more confidence than Chambers' *Vestiges*) how much the hand resembles the extremities of "lower" animals: "the framework of bones [is] the same in the hand of man," writes Darwin, as in the "wing of a bat, fin of the porpoise, and leg of the horse."<sup>6</sup> Aside from this lone sentence, Darwin famously excluded humans from his original formulation of Natural Selection, yet their conspicuous absence from the text—especially in light of discoveries concerning the "hands" of anthropoid apes—only made the subject more prominent to Victorian readers who considered the *Origin* to be "centrally concerned with man's descent."<sup>7</sup>

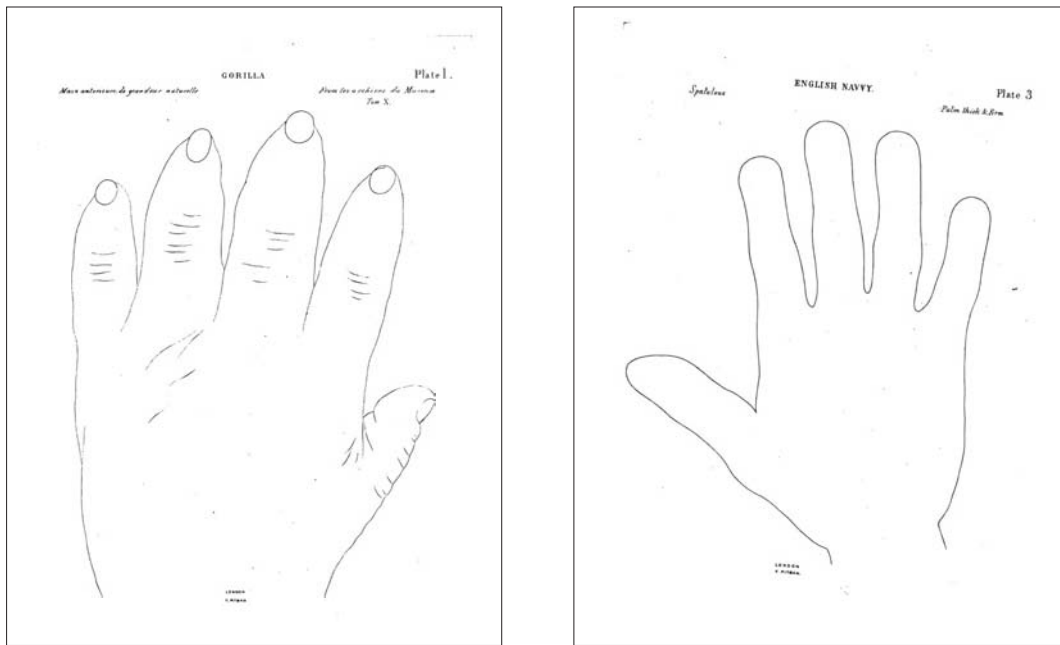
Propelled by Darwin's theory of evolution, the preoccupation with a "missing link" between humans and apes had developed into a full-fledged cultural phenomenon. Virtually every British newspaper and magazine carried stories referencing "man's nearest relation" by 1860. The findings of the British Zoological Society—and later the African explorer Paul du Chaillu—stressed the skeletal similarities of human and gorilla wrists and hands; both contained the exact same number of bones (twenty-seven). What Susan David Bernstein has appropriately termed the "*anxiety of simianation*" saturated the Victorian imagination.<sup>8</sup> Richard Beamish's *The Psychonomy of the Hand* (1843) was published in multiple editions throughout the period.<sup>9</sup> This is an especially interesting text because it included more than thirty "life-size" plates upon which readers were encouraged to trace their own hands for comparison. Such tracings emphasized the shapes of fingers and palms in determining a whole range of character "types." It

6. Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (1859), edited by Gillian Beer (London: Oxford University Press, 1996), 387.

7. Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 3rd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 59–60.

8. Susan David Bernstein, "Ape Anxiety: Sensation Fiction, Evolution, and the Genre Question," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 6, no. 2 (Autumn 2001): 250–71, 255 (italics in the original).

9. Richard Beamish, *Psychonomy of the Hand; or, the Hand an Index of Mental Development, According to MM. D'Arpentigny and Desbarrolles* (London: Pitman, 1865).



**Fig. 1** “Gorilla” and “Navy.” Plates 1 and 3 from Richard Beamish, *The Psychonomy of the Hand*

is no coincidence that the first plate and third plates feature a gorilla hand and an English navy hand, respectively (see Fig. 1).

At least as far as popular science was concerned, this was the atmosphere in which George Eliot began to compose fiction. Her early work, however, especially compared to her contemporaries, seems almost devoid of commentary on the subject of hands in the context of newly emerging questions regarding evolutionary anxieties. Put perhaps more accurately, Eliot’s early fiction adheres to an older, more generalized and more traditional representation of hands in relation to social class as opposed to evolutionary classification. In *Adam Bede* (1859), for instance, the “high-bred” Arthur Donnithorne’s hands appear often throughout the novel as “well-washed” and “white-handed” in comparison to the laboring Adam, whose carpentry work gives him “hard palms and...broken fingernails” (122, 379). Similarly, in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), the more refined characters, such as Stephen and Lucy have clean, “white hands” and “pink palms,” whereas working characters like Bob Akins have “hard, grimy” hands (334, 211). If anything, what we witness in Eliot’s early work is the establishment of a pattern of bemused dismissal of “missing link” anxieties that captivated the imaginations of so many readers in the second half of the

century. Consider the case of Molly, a maid and servant at the Poyser household in *Adam Bede*. One of the more oddly memorable scenes involving Molly occurs when Eliot's narrator describes her ability to handle multiple items while serving visitors:

Mrs. Poyser's attention was here diverted by the appearance of Molly, carrying a large jug, two small mugs, and four drinking cans, all full of ale or small beer—an interesting example of the prehensile power possessed by the human hand. (287–288)

The scene is ultimately comedic because Molly ends up dropping everything from her hands—but not because of a failure of her hands' "prehensile power." She catches her foot on an untied apron and therefore falls "with a crash and a splash into a pool of beer" (288).

At the outset of *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), Eliot mentions an evolutionary scale in discussing the behavior of the young Tom and Maggie but she does not sustain it throughout the novel. Here is the narrator describing the aftermath of an early dispute between the brother and sister:

We learn to restrain ourselves as we get older. We keep apart when we have quarrelled, express ourselves in well-bred phrases, and in this way preserve a dignified alienation, showing much firmness on one side, and swallowing much grief on the other. We no longer approximate in our behaviour to the mere impulsiveness of the lower animals, but conduct ourselves in every respect like members of a highly civilized society. Maggie and Tom were still very much like young animals, and so she could rub her cheek against his, and kiss his ear in a very random, sobbing way... (34)

The evolutionary scale becomes compacted in this instance into the movement from youth to adulthood. The impulsiveness of youth is likened to animality, while the learned civility of adulthood is elevated to a place of "dignified alienation" from the "lower animals."

The one place in *The Mill on the Floss* where Eliot directly engages with contemporary anxieties regarding the human/monkey hand involves Bob Akins, the lower-class itinerant cloth merchant. Bob has

an unusual attachment to his pocket-knife, both because of the way it feels in his hand and for its utility to him in the cloth trade. He experiences “pleasure in clutching it again and again...in opening one blade after the other, and feeling their edge with his well-hardened thumb” (46). This description, along with the title of chapter thirty four—“Aunt Glegg Learns the Breadth of Bob’s Big Thumb”—might appear Lamarckian in its experiential and proportionate orientation. However, a conversation between Maggie and Bob later in the novel reveals Eliot’s rather unequivocal position on the question of human exceptionalism that was dominating discussion in popular journals and magazines. Bob explains how his dog, Mumps, knows his “secret” to cutting cloth for his customers:

“I’n got no secrets but what Mumps knows ‘em. He knows about my big thumb, he does.”

“Your big thumb—what’s that, Bob?” said Maggie.

“That’s what it is, Miss,” said Bob, quickly, exhibiting a singularly broad specimen of that difference between the man and the monkey. “It tells i’ measuring out the flannel, you see. I carry flannel, ‘cause it’s light for my pack, an’ it’s dear stuff, you see, so a big thumb tells. I clap my thumb at the end o’ the yard and cut o’ the hither side of it...” (248–249)

By bluntly mentioning “that difference between man and monkey,” Eliot is wading directly into the anxious cultural debate about the status of humans in relation to the “hands” of newly discovered anthropoid apes. In his 1859 *On the Gorilla*, for example, Richard Owen finds himself at pains to distinguish between human and animal hands: “Man’s perfect hand is one of his peculiar physical characteristics; that perfection is mainly due to the extreme differentiation of the fist from the other four digits and its concomitant power of opposing them a perfect thumb.”<sup>10</sup> Owen’s point is that the thumbs of “the highest quadrumana” fail to measure up to the human thumb’s perfection.<sup>11</sup>

10. Richard Owen, *On the Gorilla* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1865), 78.

11. For a discussion of the embodied hand in terms of religious thought in the nineteenth century, see Capuano, *Changing Hands*, Chapter 2: “The Anatomy of Anglican Industry,” 42–65. See also, Aviva Briefel’s Introduction to *The Racial Hand in the Victorian Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), especially pages 2–3.



Like nearly every serious scientist and intellectual of the 1860s and 1870s, Eliot maintained a physiological understanding of the development of organic life. But unlike many of her contemporaries, she remained relatively unmoved by the anxieties about the hand that swept through the post-Darwinian world. This is because Eliot and others in her circle held a belief that would later characterize major twentieth-century scientific and philosophical views of the human hand's differentiation from those of the great apes.<sup>12</sup> Her partner George Henry Lewes, for example, conceded that although "the ape has hands very much like man's," its "faculties are not a fiftieth part of those performed by the hand of man."<sup>13</sup> For Eliot, as we shall see, the most important of these faculties was the human hand's unique ability to transfer sympathetic feeling between individual lives. Even at the height of the "gorillamania" that so often dominated popular and scientific writing in the early 1860s, Eliot's fiction emphasizes the uniquely human attributes of the hand's sensitivity, receptiveness, and most significantly, its connection to sympathetic feeling. Sympathy, of course, was the highest secular form of the sacred for Eliot, and so it's no coincidence that her most outwardly "religious" novels emphasize the sensory, rather than the evolutionary, characteristics of hands.

### **Secular Sympathy in *Romola***

*Romola* (1862–1863) has long been interpreted as an outlier in Eliot's oeuvre. It chronicles the intricate and sometimes belabored intricacies of Roman Catholic culture in late fifteenth-century Florence. J. B. Bullen began a 1975 article by asserting that "*Romola* is a puzzling novel because it is unlike anything else that George Eliot wrote."<sup>14</sup> More recently, in an edited collection dedicated to a re-evaluation of *Romola*, Caroline Levine and Mark Turner contend that "it is only when set in

12. I am thinking here of the way the hand is treated in the work of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, among others.

13. George Henry Lewes, *Problems: A Cultural Study of Life and Mind* (Boston: Houghton, 1879), I:28.

14. J. B. Bullen, "George Eliot's *Romola* as a Positivist Allegory," *The Review of English Studies* 26, no. 4 (November 1975): 425–445, 425.



the unitary context of George Eliot's *oeuvre* that the novel disappoints, drawing criticism, most emphatically, for failing to resemble the author's other novels."<sup>15</sup> I want to counter this prevailing view of the novel by making two interrelated points. First, by focusing so much on her characters' hands in *Romola*, Eliot—despite its fifteenth-century Florentine setting—is actively engaged (albeit in a different way) with her own culture's contemporary fascination with “manual” apprehensiveness. Second, Eliot's treatment of the uniqueness of human hands allows her to establish a body part on which she can project her belief in the need for a secular, but crucially sacramental, model for “passionate sympathy” (*Romola* 401).

Eliot composed *Romola*, as we have seen, when England was transfixed by the evolutionary tension figured in the relationship between human and animal hands. In contrast to this anxious tension, Eliot emphasizes the human hand's unique and privileged ability to act as an extension of both sight and soul. Take, for example, her description of the blind scholar Bardo's request to experience Tito's disposition through manual contact early in the novel:

“But before you go—” here the old man, in spite of himself, fell into a more faltering tone—“you will perhaps permit me to touch your hand? It is long since I touched the hand of a young man.”

Bardo had stretched out his aged white hand and Tito immediately placed his dark but delicate and supple fingers within it. Bardo's cramped fingers closed over them, and he held them for a few minutes in silence. (75)

Beyond the necessity created by Bardo's blindness, the interaction Eliot creates here would have been extremely familiar to an audience that believed the hand readily offered up privileged information about human character and identity. It is significant that Bardo's first interest is in Tito's hands, and that he uses the sensitivity of his own hands to gather more information about the differences between Tito and his (religious) son:

15. Caroline Levine and Mark Turner, eds., *From Author to Text: Re-reading George Eliot's "Romola"* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 2.

Bardo passed his hand again and again over the long curls and grasped them a little, as if their spiral resistance made his inward vision clearer; then he passed his hand over the brow and cheek, tracing the profile with the edge of his palm and fourth finger, and letting the breadth of his hand repose on the rich oval of the cheek.

“Ah,” he said, as his hand glided from the face and rested on the young man’s shoulder. “He must be very unlike thy brother, Romola: and it is the better. You see no visions, I trust, my young friend?” (76)

This interaction also establishes an important manual basis for two distinct forces that Eliot initially places in opposition to each other in the novel: secular humanism and Catholic religiosity. Romola has been reared in an atmosphere of scholarly humanism, and so she shares her father’s abhorrence for orthodox religion—a fact made all the more contentious because of her brother’s denunciation of their father’s lifestyle and his subsequent call to the Dominican religious order. This abhorrence only deepens when she goes to her brother’s death bed at the San Marco cathedral. As she first enters the room where her brother Dino lay dying—a room with “frescoed walls” depicting the crucifixion scene—she immediately recoils: “There was an unconquerable repulsion for her in that monkish aspect; it seemed to her the brand of the dastardly undutifulness which had left her father desolate—of the groveling superstition which could give such undutifulness the name of piety” (161).

The opposition between secular, humanist sympathy and Roman Catholic religiosity collides in this scene as Romola encounters the famous Fra Girolamo Savonarola for the first time. Devastated by Dino’s abandonment of her father for the church and “taught to despise” everything connected to his religious calling, Romola steels herself not to allow religion to mar her final moments with her dying brother. The forcible presence of Savonarola changes her orientation profoundly, however, and Eliot registers this momentous change primarily through a detailed account of the famous monk’s voice and hands. The cowl-shrouded Savonarola says in a tone that is *not* “of imperious command, but of quiet self-possession...blended with benignity”: “Kneel, my daughter, for the Angel of Death is present, and waits while the

message of heaven is delivered: bend thy pride before it is bent for thee by a yoke of iron" (165). At this pivotal moment, Eliot configures Romola's unexpected response as one that is mediated through her thoughts about Savonarola's most remarkable feature—his hands:

His face was hardly discernable under the shadow of the cowl, and her eyes fell at once on his hands, which were folded across his breast and lay in relief on the edge of his black mantle. *They had a marked physiognomy which enforced the influence of the voice:* they were beautiful and almost of transparent delicacy. Romola's disposition to rebel against command, doubly active in the presence of monks, whom she had been taught to despise, would have fixed itself on any repulsive detail as a point of support. But the face was hidden, and the hands seemed to have an appeal in them against all hardness. (165, emphasis added)

It is important that the narrator describes Savonarola's hands, rather than his face, as having "a marked physiognomy" because his prominent facial features were so well known to the people of Florence and to Eliot herself. Baccio della Porta (later Fra Bartolommeo) had painted a famous side-profile portrait of Savonarola's face that hung in the museum of San Marco, and Eliot had encountered it on many occasions while performing research for *Romola*. After the extended depiction of Savonarola's hands, Eliot's narrator does eventually describe the facial features that had "le[nt] themselves to popular description": "There was the high arched nose, the prominent under lip, the coronet of thick dark hair above the brow, all seeming to tell of energy and passion" (165–166). But even this facial description is framed in terms of what we've already been told about Savonarola's "beautiful" hands: "there were the blue-grey eyes, shining mildly under the auburn eyelashes, seeming, like the hands, to tell of acute sensitiveness" (166). It is precisely this acute sensitivity of Savonarola's hands that informs what the narrator calls "the mysterious influence of a personality...given to some rare men to move their fellows" (166). Indeed, the dramatic next line of the novel reports that the religiously hostile Romola "slowly fell on her knees."

The fact that *Romola* is the only one of Eliot's novels to be accompanied by illustrations in its first edition (in *The Cornhill Magazine*)



**Fig. 2** “The Dying Message.” Frederic Leighton. *The Cornhill Magazine*, October 1862

provides additional context for her focus on Savonarola’s hands. The following full-page illustration by Frederic Leighton, entitled “The Dying Message,” appeared at the front of the October 1862 installment with the same chapter (XV) heading (see Fig. 2).

As Eliot’s letters indicate, and as Leonee Ormond and others have noted, author and illustrator corresponded extensively and met in person to discuss the illustrations that would appear with each month’s installment.<sup>16</sup> This does not mean that Eliot and Leighton always “saw” the same things as the novel unfolded month to month. In fact, Eliot was considerably disappointed with the novel’s first illustration, “The Blind Scholar and His Daughter.” A letter to Leighton records this disappointment: “I wished Bardo’s head to be raised with the chin thrust forward a little—the usual attitude of the blind head, I think—and a little turned towards Romola.”<sup>17</sup> Eliot discussed the matter early on with Lewes and eventually acknowledged that the dynamic of multiple mimetic representation “must [necessarily] forbid the perfect

16. See Leonee Ormond, “Frederic Leighton and the Illustrations for *Romola*,” *George Eliot Review* 45, no. 1 (2014): 50–55, 52. (emphasis original).

17. George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*, edited by Gordon Sherman Haight, 9 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1955), 4:40.





**Fig. 3** Inset from “The Dying Message”

correspondence between the text and the illustration.”<sup>18</sup> Her conversation with Lewes on this point seemingly led her to accept the impossibility of having artists working in two mediums achieve unerring congruity. Part of Eliot’s acceptance was likely also affected by the fact that she was asking Leighton to “see” what was in her imagination rather than in the prose he was provided from which to produce his sketches. This is an important point. Her prose, upon which the disagreement centers in the early Bardo/Romola illustration, does not indicate that Bardo’s head is raised, nor that his chin is “thrust forward a little.”

What makes “The Dying Message” illustration so compelling fifteen chapters later, though, is how closely it *does* fit the criterion of fidelity to the accompanying prose narrative in nearly every detail. Take, for instance, Eliot’s description of Romola’s entrance into the chamber where her brother’s dramatic death scene takes place. Romola is “conscious” that “there was another monk standing by the bed, with the black cowl drawn over his head” (160). She is also “just conscious” that “in the background there was a crucified form rising high and pale on the frescoed wall” (161). This fresco appears in the upper right section of “The Dying Message,” but its appearance is truncated so that we see only the crossed, praying hands of the mourners Mary, Mary’s sister, and Mary Magdalene below (see Fig. 3).

In his seminal work of criticism on Eliot’s relation to the visual arts, Hugh Witemeyer remarks with some surprise that Leighton “positively

18. *Ibid.*, 4:41.

avoided the well-known [facial] features of Savonarola.”<sup>19</sup> This is because Eliot so positively does so in her prose, and Leighton—smarting from the initial “disagreement” in the Bardo/Romola scene—would not have wanted to hazard another disappointing illustration. Savonarola’s body appears entirely shrouded in his robe and cowl in both prose and illustration, with the sole exception of “his hands, which were folded across his breast and lay in relief on the edge of his black mantle” (165). The fidelity to such an image in the illustration reinforces the “acute sensitiveness” of Savonarola’s hands, helping the reader see what Romola feels: that “they were very beautiful and almost of transparent delicacy.... hands [that] seemed to have an appeal in them against all hardness.” The central compositional placement of the mourner’s hands folded across their breasts in similar relief on the frescoed wall helps draw the reader’s attention, like Romola’s, to the exceptionality of Savonarola’s similarly folded hands. The dramatic effect of the nearly exact correlation between prose and illustration here is nothing short of arresting. “The unconquerable repulsion” to religion that Romola possesses at the beginning of the scene dissipates into an awe for the “mysterious influence” of Savonarola, causing her to clutch the crucifix and kneel by her dying brother in “renunciation of her proud erectness” (161, 166). The novelist and illustrator seem to have learned how to achieve a far more synchronized imaginative vision. Eliot’s prose and Leighton’s corresponding illustration together form an exemplary instance of what Peter Wagner calls an “iconotext”: an “artifact in which the verbal and the visual signs mingle to produce rhetoric that depends on the co-presence of words and images.”<sup>20</sup>

An uncannily similar scene occurs, in both prose and illustration, when Romola attempts to flee Florence and, along with it, her marriage to Tito. Again, despite the discovery and subsequent confrontation by Savonarola, she is “determined not to show any sign of submission” (369). “I will not return,” Romola proclaims in “stron[g] rebellion”: “I acknowledge no right of priests and monks to interfere with my actions. You have no power over me” (369). But as in the scene at her brother’s deathbed, Romola finds it extremely difficult to

19. Hugh Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 159.

20. Peter Wagner, *Icons, Texts, Iconotext* (New York: de Gruyter, 1996), 16.

resist the “immense personal influence of Savonarola” (374). The narrator tells us that this influence comes from “the energy of his emotions and beliefs” and “that his words impl[y] a higher law than any [Romola] had yet obeyed” (374). Michael Schiefelbein maintains that Savonarola’s “authoritative glance is sacramental” and “a visible sign of the Divine presence.”<sup>21</sup> But this facial marker is certainly not Eliot’s emphasis in the novel’s most dramatic and influential scenes—neither in her prose nor in Leighton’s illustrations. In fact, Romola says of Savonarola’s “calm glance” as she is stopped fleeing from Florence that “there was nothing transcendent in [his] face. It was not beautiful” (369–370). We know that Savonarola’s hands are his most exceptionally beautiful feature, and Eliot transfers what we already know about his hands’ “acute sensitiveness” and “almost transparent delicacy” to this scene where Romola’s awe is once more rendered in distinctly manual terms: “she sat shaken by awe...as if that destiny which men thought of as a sceptered deity had come to her, and grasped her with fingers of flesh” (368). The divinity residing in Savonarola’s hands at this juncture in the novel is important enough that Eliot and Leighton agreed that it should be represented in both prose and illustration at the start of the February 1863 installment (see Fig. 4). The narrator informs us—and the illustration shows us—that “almost unconsciously [Romola] sank on her knees. Savonarola stretched out his hands over her; but feeling would no longer pass through the channel of speech, and he was silent” (377).

Here, though not shown wearing the cowl, Savonarola’s head and face are hardly visible compared to his hands, which appear in stark relief against the dark cypress trees in the background. Leighton’s visual resonances again buttress the verbal ones in Eliot’s prose. With Savonarola’s hands dramatically positioned at the compositional center of the illustration, the scene takes on the feeling of divine intervention—where the divine “feeling” that “would no longer pass through the channel of speech” passes instead through the “extremities of his sensitive fingers” (541).

There is perhaps no finer example of Eliot’s simultaneous engagement with the religiosity of her Florentine subject matter and her own culture’s heightened interest in new evolutionary scales than her

21. Michael Schiefelbein, “Crucifixes and Madonnas: George Eliot’s Fascination with Catholicism in *Romola*,” *Victorian Newsletter* 88, no. 1 (1995): 31–34, 32.





**Fig. 4** “Father, I Will Be Guided.” Frederic Leighton. *The Cornhill Magazine*, February 1863

depiction of Savonarola's final outdoor Mass at the San Marco Piazza. As Savonarola makes his way to the altar, "the multitude" of worshipers experiences the same "electric awe" as Romola (522). The narrator likens the scene to one where "men who have been watching something in the heavens see the expected presence silently disclosing itself" (522). Savonarola emerges onto the altar "covered from head to foot in black cowl and mantle," but once again his most distinguishable feature comes into sharpest focus:

he stretched out his hands, which, in their exquisite delicacy, seemed transfigured from an animal organ for grasping into vehicles of sensibility too acute to need any gross contact: hands that came like an appealing speech from that part of his soul which was masked by his strong passionate face. (522)

Here we encounter a marked extension of what we witnessed in *The Mill on the Floss*. In *The Mill*, the narrator fleetingly uses Bob Akins's "big thumb" as an occasion to exhibit "the difference between the man and the monkey" (248–249). The description of Savonarola's hands, though, transcends their practical capacity as "an animal organ for grasping" as they become "a part of his soul." The powerful sympathy residing in Savonarola's soul, primarily visible in his outstretched hands, affects the crowd at the San Marco Piazza in the same way that Romola had felt as if "a sceptered deity had come to her, and grasped her with fingers of flesh" (368). We learn that "at the first stretching out of [Savonarola's] hands some of the crowd in the front ranks fell on their knees" (522–523). One may wonder why Eliot ultimately decided not to illustrate this powerful scene. We have continually read about and viewed depictions of the power of Savonarola's hands have on Romola and others throughout the novel. As W. J. T. Mitchell has keenly observed, "the very idea of an 'idea' is bound up with the notion of imagery" once we view it.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps having viewed Savonarola's remarkable hands in other illustrations, we need only to read associative descriptions of them to invoke their exceptional ability to transcend all practicality and become vehicles of sensibility and sympathetic feeling.

22. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 5.

### Manual Kinship in *Daniel Deronda*

Eliot's final work of fiction, *Daniel Deronda* (1876), represents the culmination, and the most complex instance, of her sustained interest in the sympathetic and determinative power residing in human hands. While Eliot was relatively unmoved by her culture's anxieties regarding the hand's evolutionary proximity to "lower" animals, however, she was in lock-step agreement with the foremost scientists of her day who maintained organicist assumptions about physiological development. Like Herbert Spencer, John Tyndall, and George Henry Lewes, Eliot was drawn to issues of physiological inheritance—and particularly to what Mary Jean Corbett accurately terms "the historical/ cultural/ biological production of difference" that Charles Darwin's *Descent of Man* brought to the fore in 1871.<sup>23</sup> Eliot had in fact subscribed to a version of this model of determinism from the beginning of her writing career. Her reformulation of Wilhelm Riehl's ideas in "The History of German Life" in 1856, for example, stakes out a distinctly physiological basis for national, ethnic, and class "type":

In Germany...it is among the peasantry that we must look for the historical type of the national *physique*. In the towns this type has become so modified to express the individual, that even "family likeness" is often but faintly marked. But the peasants may still be distinguished into groups by their physical peculiarities. In one part of the country we find a longer-legged, in another a broader-shouldered race, which has inherited these peculiarities for centuries.<sup>24</sup>

While Eliot was reviewing Riehl, Lewes was solidifying his own "fixed type" model of historical and biological development for inclusion in *Physiology of Common Life* (1860).<sup>25</sup> Both authors were simultaneously

23. Mary Jean Corbett, *Family Likeness: Sex, Marriage, and Incest from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 116.

24. George Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life," in *Selected Critical Writings*, edited by Rosemary Ashton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 260–295, 267 (emphasis in the original).

25. George Henry Lewes, *The Physiology of Common Life* (New York: Appleton, 1860).

interested in pursuing questions of identifiable inheritance among historically, culturally, and biologically isolated populations. As a result, Jewish history became an obvious interest for both Lewes and Eliot. Lewes wrote in *Physiology of Common Life*:

We will not say that it is mere coincidence which preserves intact the various “breeds of animals: which makes the bull-dog resemble the bull dog, and the bull-dog and terrier; which makes the Jews all over the world resemble Jews, because they keep their race free from admixture, by never marrying into other races.”<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, in “The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!” (1879), Eliot maintained that “every Jew” possesses common attributes passed down by “ancestors who have transmitted to them” a particular “physical and mental type.”<sup>27</sup> Such formulations of course fit the more general nineteenth-century cultural assumption that one’s classed, racial, and hereditary identity was always demarcated *somewhere* on the body. The era’s preoccupation with the pseudosciences of phrenology and physiognomy reflect this faith in external demarcation. As her own character, Mrs. Irwine, confidently proclaims in *Adam Bede*: “you’ll never persuade me that I can’t tell what men are by their outsides” (126).

It is crucial to note, though, how the power and pervasiveness of this cultural assumption presented major obstacles for Eliot’s “realistic” narration of *Daniel Deronda*. In order to fulfill the novel’s very particular set of narrative requirements, Deronda’s future and—by the logic of Eliot’s (and her culture’s) physiological understanding of Jewish identity—his past must be detectable by some (select characters) but not by others (Deronda and readers). All the while, the legibility of such Jewishness needed also to surmount the double difficulty of either depicting Jews as invisible through assimilation or as too visible as a stigmatized type. These exigencies make for an extremely problematic set of narratological circumstances. Perhaps Gillian Beer characterizes these problems best, defining them as a matter of “how to liberate the future [of Deronda’s Jewishness] into its proper and

26. *Ibid.*, 315.

27. George Eliot, “The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!” in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, edited by Nancy Henry (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), 164.



powerful state of indeterminacy and yet make it a [realistic] part of the [present] story.”<sup>28</sup>

It is my contention that Eliot resolves these narratological problems by locating Daniel Deronda’s Jewishness in his hands. She does this for several reasons that link up with her general tendency to locate determinism and exceptionalism manually throughout her career. Beyond Savonarola, early on in *Felix Holt* (1866), Harold Transome fails to notice his biological connection to Mr. Jermyn by way of their hands’ similarities:

[Jermyn’s] white, fat, but beautifully-shaped hands, which he was in the habit of rubbing gently on his entrance into a room, gave him very much the air of a lady’s physician. Harold remembered with some amusement his uncle’s dislike of [Jermyn’s] conspicuous hands; but as his own were soft and dimpled, and as he too was given to the innocent practice of rubbing those members, his suspicions were not yet deepened. (36)

So too in her long verse poem, *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868), Eliot locates Fedalma’s realization of her (organic) Zincala heritage in the physical likeness evident in her hands:

Look at these hands! You say they were little  
They played about the gold on your neck.  
I do believe it, for their tiny pulse  
Made record of it in the inmost coil

28. Beer, *Darwin’s Plots*, 185. Critics of virtually every stripe have responded to the “crisis” of Deronda’s supposed physical abstraction with a myriad of disparate interpretations. Henry James was among the first to voice a critical frustration with Eliot’s lack of physiological description. In James’s estimation, Eliot’s deliberate ambiguity on the topic of Deronda’s appearance made him “a person outside of Judaism—aesthetically” (687). Perhaps the most notable and enduring interpretation has been Cynthia Chase’s influential— and what some consider “virtuoso”—contention that the realism of the plot “goes aground” on the issue of Deronda’s circumcision (see discussion in Ian Duncan, “George Eliot’s Science Fiction,” *Representations* 125, no. 1 [Winter 2014]: 15–39, 31). Chase’s argument works brilliantly because of its premise that Deronda’s Jewish illegibility could appear everywhere *but* on his circumcised penis—an obviously “unseeable” place in the novel (222). My argument is that criticism of this important subject has focused for far too long on body parts that have preoccupied contemporary critics, as opposed to those that were most visible and important to Victorians.

Of growing memory. But see them now!  
 Oh, they have made fresh record; twined themselves  
 With other throbbing hands whose pulse feed  
 Not memories but a blended life...<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, *Daniel Deronda* presents a far more complicated case of hereditary (and therefore racial) determinism than Eliot had ever undertaken previously.

In her final novel, Eliot paradoxically depends on the fact that her readers, as focused as they were on hands, were unlikely to have been familiar with the overwhelmingly *positive* biblical connections between Jews and hands. Thus, such a familiar text allows for a physiologically determinative body part to go virtually unnoticed as either a presence or an absence in the narrative. The demarcation of Jewishness in hands also fits a larger objective to replace unfortunate Jewish stereotypes with more historically informed connections between Judaism and Christianity. Eliot noted that her contemporaries “hardly k[new] that Christ was a Jew” and quipped that she could quite easily “find men educated at Rugby supposing that Christ spoke Greek.”<sup>30</sup> Not only was Eliot well versed in the myriad positive biblical representations of Jewish hands, but she also studied the Kabbalah deeply before composing the novel.<sup>31</sup> This previously unexplored dimension of what I would term “mystical physiology” depends on the fact that the hand is a crucial component in the relationship that the Kabbalah identifies between Jewish bodies and sacred Jewish texts. Such a connection was known well enough in the 1860s that an article in Charles Dickens’s *All the Year Round* entitled “Give Me Your Hand” quoted Adolphe Desbarrolles (the founder of nineteenth-century hand reading) as saying that “chiromancy is entirely based on the Kaballa [sic].”<sup>32</sup> Important sections of the *Zohar* (the central Kabbalistic text), for instance,

29. George Eliot, *The Spanish Gypsy*, edited by Antoine Gerard van den Broek (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008), lines 2963–2971.

30. F. M. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 72.

31. See William Baker, *George Eliot and Judaism* (Salzburg: University of Salzburg Press, 1975); and Jane Irwin, *George Eliot’s “Daniel Deronda” Notebooks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

32. “Give Me Your Hand,” *All the Year Round* 10 (1863): 345–349 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1864), 346.

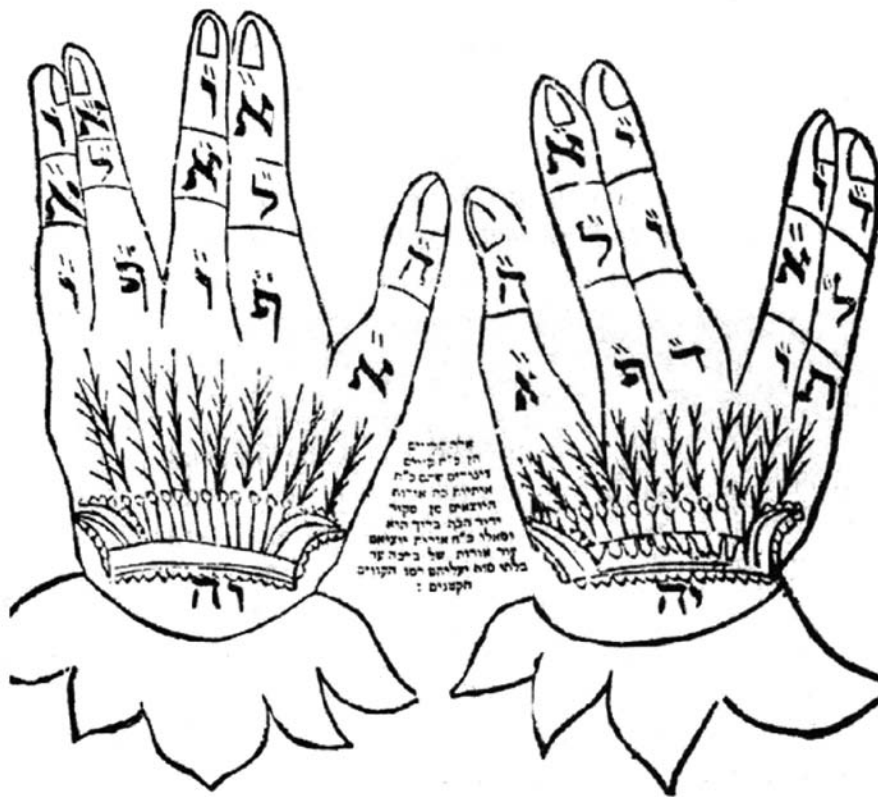


Fig. 5 Shabbetai Horowitz. *Shefa Tal*. 1612

explicitly focus on how the “supernal mysteries” of the hand reveal an unbroken line of Jewish descendants from Biblical times onward.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, to practitioners of the Kabbalah, Jewish hands are “fashioned as symbols of hidden, supernal *realities*” in such a way that is demonstrated in Shabbetai Horowitz’s iconic representation in the *Shefa Tal* (1612) (see Fig. 5).

The practicing Kabbalist actually sees the fifteen words of Aaron’s sacred blessing in direct physical correlation to the fifteen parts of the hand (fourteen joint sections plus the palm). This anthropomorphic correlation is highlighted also by the inscriptions appearing on the hands and fingers, with each of the letters of the twenty-two-letter Hebrew alphabet retaining a specific numerical equivalent. The letters at the base of each hand in the *Shefa Tal* thus meet to spell the unutterable name of God in the Bible: YHWH. Partly because the four

33. Daniel Matt, ed. and trans., *The Zohar* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 411.



letters of the word (*yod, he, vav, he*) have the same numerical value (45) as the letters of Adam in esoteric gnosis, Kabbalists interpret hands as a crucial site of divine inscription where “the science of letter permutation” becomes decipherable. Not only did Eliot take notes on this kind of (*gematriatic*) symbolism while studying Christian Ginsburg’s *The Kabbalah* (1863), but she was also familiar with precisely this kind of Hebrew hand iconography from her visits to the Okopowa Street Jewish Cemetery in Prague during the 1860s.<sup>34</sup> There, as is often the case in older Jewish cemeteries, a majority of the 200,000 marked graves are graced with hands in exactly the same position as those in the *Shefa Tal*—inscribed and facing up to heaven at the top section of the tombstones.

It is the recognition of Deronda’s hands within this mystical system of physiological interpretation—rather than what critics have interpreted as wishful vision or shamanistic enthusiasm<sup>35</sup>—that accounts for the swiftness and unswerving confidence of Mordecai’s identification of Deronda as a Jew relatively early on in the novel. However, virtually any recognition of Deronda’s Jewishness is, to use Eliot’s own phrase, a flag over highly contested ground. Since the novel’s publication, Eliot’s supposed withholding of Deronda’s physical attributes has been a constant source of critical frustration, and it remains one reason why the question of Deronda’s corporeal Jewishness has had so much traction (or slippage, depending on one’s theoretical allegiances) for generations of critics.<sup>36</sup> Some of this frustration is warranted. For the first sixteen chapters of the novel, the closest the narrator comes

34. Irwin, *Notebooks*, 456.

35. Critics most often interpret Mordecai’s seemingly unfounded and early insistence on Deronda’s Jewishness as an odd, “wish-fulfillment aspect” of the plot (Jonathan Loeb, “Aesthetics, Ethics, and Unreadable Acts in George Eliot,” in *Knowing the Past*, edited by Suzy Anger [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006], 121–147, 139). Audrey Jaffe captures the spirit of a line of critical interpretation running fairly straight between U. C. Knoepfelmacher and Deborah Epstein Nord when she claims that “before Mordecai’s ‘wishful vision,’ Deronda is the Jew even the most discerning of observers can’t discern” (*Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000], 125). Nord contends that Mordecai “decides” to regard Deronda as a Jew “for his own quixotic reasons” (*Gypsies and the British Imagination, 1807–1930* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2006], 116). According to Michael Ragussis, Mordecai “unaccountably” asks Deronda to accept a Jewish heritage (*Figures of Conversion: “The Jewish Question” and English National Identity* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995], 273).

36. U. C. Knoepfelmacher sees Deronda as “fleshless and ethereal” (*Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965], 147). George Levine

to revealing anything specific about Deronda's physicality occurs when we learn that he "might have served as a model for any painter who wanted to image the most memorable of boys" (141). This changes, though, in the seventeenth chapter when we encounter the novel's single most descriptive passage of Deronda's "terrestrial" embodiment:

Rowing in his dark-blue shirt and skull-cap, his curls closely clipped, his mouth beset with abundant soft waves of beard, he bore only disguised traces of the seraphic boy "trailing clouds of glory" ... The voice, sometimes audible in subdued snatches of song, had turned out merely high baritone; indeed, only to look at his lithe powerful frame and firm gravity of his face would have been enough for an experienced guess that he had no rare and ravishing tenor such as nature reluctantly makes at some sacrifice. *Look at his hands:* they are not small and dimpled, with tapering fingers that seem to have only a deprecating touch: they are long, flexible, firmly grasping hands, such as Titian has painted in a picture where he wanted to show the combination of refinement with force...Not seraphic any longer: thoroughly terrestrial and manly; but still of a kind to raise belief in a human dignity which can afford to acknowledge poor relations. (157–158, emphasis added)

Not only does Eliot specifically draw our attention to Deronda's hands as she has done in *Romola*, *Felix Holt*, and *The Spanish Gypsy*, but she also eventually makes good on the idea that the sympathetic exceptionalism represented in his hands "can afford to acknowledge poor

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asserts that Deronda "is almost literally abstracted from the contingencies of the sensible world" (*Realism, Ethics and Secularism: Essays on Victorian Literature and Science* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012], 43) and Irene Tucker maintains that Jewishness in the novel is a "condition of spectrality" (*A Probable State: The Novel, the Contract, and the Jews* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 96). Bryan Cheyette interprets Deronda's "featureless" body as a necessary precondition for Eliot's displacement of nationalist ideals on her eponymous hero (*Constructions of "the Jew" in English Literature and Society* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 45). Daniel A. Novak argues that Deronda's "corporeal evacuation and abstraction" is the product of a literal reproduction of Francis Galton's "composite photography" of Jewish faces ("A Model Jew: 'Literary Photographs' and the Jewish Body in *Daniel Deronda*," *Representations* 85, no. 1 [Winter 2004]: 58–97, 60). These typological composites—where anything and nothing are possible—make Deronda a "model Jew" (45, original italics).

*relations*”—in the sense of religious and hereditary kinship. Later in this same chapter, Deronda rescues the unmistakably Jewish Mirah from drowning in the Thames. Even the rescue is inflected with a kind of “manual” Jewishness, though. Mirah takes Deronda’s outstretched hand and pronounces— quizzically, but with “reverential fervour”: “The God of *our* fathers bless you and deliver you from all evil as you have delivered me” (170–171, emphasis added).

I want to be very careful about the specifics of the larger argument I am making about Deronda’s hands. Despite the concentrated focus on Deronda’s hands at this particular juncture in the narrative, the fact that Eliot provides *only* hints about his (Jewish) future is pivotal for my contention about the way hands operate in the world of this novel. No amount of praise for Deronda’s hands in this early scene could guarantee his Jewishness for anyone, including perhaps most crucially, Deronda himself. Indeed, the narrator explicitly emphasizes as much. We learn that Deronda has “no thought of an adventure in which his *appearance* was likely to play any part” as he rows beneath the Kew bridge just minutes before encountering the drowning Mirah (158, emphasis added). My point is that, as a dedicated practitioner of the Kabbalah, Mordecai possesses the religious and mystical training to decipher Deronda’s Jewishness despite having no knowledge of his parentage, in Eliot’s text. Mordecai’s Kabbalistic orientation gives a certain credence to what are, up to this point in the narrative, only inchoate ideas of Jewishness—such as Mirah’s fleeting, but arresting, presumption that the God of her fathers is the God of Deronda’s fathers. This helps explain why Eliot was drawn to the convergence of determinism and prophecy in the Kabbalah; it offers her a realistic mode of prediction that is to a large degree hidden. Thus, all of the novel’s other exigencies can follow: Deronda may be Jewish without him, other characters, or the reader knowing it too soon. Analyzing the Kabbalah’s relationship to prophecy is also an intervention on behalf of the novel’s realism. An understanding of Eliot’s knowledge of the Kabbalah eliminates what so many critics see as detrimental to the text’s realism; namely, its supposed reliance on the (unrealistic) trope of metalepsis (the transference of effects into causes).

The predictive element of Deronda’s status as a Jew at last becomes outwardly determinative when he meets his mother in Genoa. The long-awaited reunion of Deronda with his mother is also the most poignant example of Eliot’s tendency to locate Jewishness in his hands.

Upon meeting her son for the first time since his infancy, the Alcharisi is preeminently drawn to what we already know is Deronda's most extraordinary physical attribute:

"Let me look at your hand again: the hand with the ring on. It was your father's ring."

[Deronda] drew his chair nearer to her and gave her his hand. We know *what type of hand it was*: her own very much smaller *was of the same type*. (543, emphasis added)

The physiological "type" of hand shared by mother and son adheres to Eliot's and Lewes's sense of the fixed organic model—especially in relation to Jewish endogamy and its laws of matrilineal descent. Moreover, the Alcharisi's biblical (oddly Jacobesque) request to inspect her son's hands links up with Eliot's larger aim to reacquaint her audience with the positive connections between Judaism and Christianity. Just as many Anglican Britons, much to Eliot's dismay, hardly recognized that Christ was a Jew, many who perpetuated negative stereotypes of Jewish hands as "bony, yellow, [and] crablike" were wholly ignorant of the sacred status of Jewish hands in the Bible—let alone the Kabbalah (*Deronda* 4). For Jews, the "hand of God" was not merely a scriptural allusion to divine power in the Hebrew Bible; it was the sacred body part through which God worked most directly: Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt by stretching his hands over the Red Sea (Exod. 14:21) and later helps Joshua's army to victory by raising and lowering his hands from afar in the battle against Amalek (Exod. 17:10–13). We may witness this centrality of embodied handedness to Judaic culture more recently in work by Sigmund Freud, whose famous essay, "The Moses of Michelangelo" (1914), focuses not on theoretical developments arising from psychoanalysis, but instead on the positionality and strength of Moses's sculpted hands.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, the cover image of Melvin Konner's *The Jewish Body* (2009), features only two strong and statuesque fists.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, in the pivotal moment of mother-son reunion in Genoa, Eliot's (positively) racialized view of heredity, her commitment to disabuse Britain of negative Jewish stereotypes,

37. Sigmund Freud, "The Moses of Michelangelo," in *The Sigmund Freud Reader*, edited by Peter Gay (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 522–539.

38. Melvin Konner, *The Jewish Body* (New York: Schocken Books, 2009).

and her successful negotiation of problematic narrative requirements all converge on the figure of Deronda's hand in a singular moment of haptic (manual) visibility—what William Cohen, in another context, calls “seeing on the model of touch.”<sup>39</sup>

Deronda's hands mark him as a Jew in the world of Eliot's final novel but, crucially his hands do not perform *only* this function. The “consecrating power” of Deronda's sympathy for others—Jew and non-Jew alike—manifests itself throughout the narrative in scenes that make a spectacle of the firm but gentle touch embodied in the Titian example (141). Nowhere is the “flexible sympathy” of Deronda's touch more apparent than in his reaction to Gwendolen's suffering (307). We witness such physiologized sympathy in the narrator's description of Gwendolen's account of the harrowing story of Grandcourt's death:

Her quivering lips remained parted as she ceased speaking. Deronda could not answer; he was obliged to look away. He took one of her hands, and clasped it as if they were going to walk together as two children: [the hand clasp] was the only way he could answer, “I will not forsake you”...

That grasp was an entirely new experience to Gwendolen: she had never before had from any man a sign of tenderness which her own being had needed, and she interpreted its powerful effect on her into a promise of inexhaustible patience and constancy. The stream of renewed strength made it possible for her to go on... (592)

The divinely restorative impact of Deronda's hands so transcends the Jewish realm that the narrator ultimately renders even Daniel's dialogue with Gwendolen in the rhetoric of manual intervention: “[His] words were like the touch of a miraculous hand to Gwendolen” (659).

This universalized but divine mode of transcendence is fitting, however, since the narrative does not lead to a discovery that Deronda is no longer English; it instead shows that he is also a Jew. The expanded scope of Deronda's relationships with groups ranging from the poor Jewish Cohens to the aristocratic Christian Mallingers allows Eliot to transform the possibility of multiple class and religious allegiances into multiple racial, ethnic, and national possibilities. The

39. William Cohen, *Sex Scandal* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 17.

novel literally enacts this multiplicity on the level of plot where Deronda's hands connect what skeptics have long referred to as the English and the Jewish "halves" of the text: he becomes a sacred priest to the Christian Gwendolen even as he and Mirah prepare to build a Jewish homeland in the East. Ultimately, Eliot sacramentalizes Deronda's hands not only because they are Jewish, but because of her longstanding belief that they are the appendages through which human sympathy flows most directly—as we saw in *Romola*. Writing at a time when her culture was anxiously preoccupied by the possibilities of animality and "devolution" in ape-like hands, Eliot saw human hands as instruments of elevated and divine feeling. Most importantly, recognizing how Eliot treats hands in her fiction adds a decidedly embodied dimension to her most sacred concern for human sympathy in her work.

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