

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

1993

Some Notes on George Eliot and Greek Myth

Lesley Gordon

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Gordon, Lesley, "Some Notes on George Eliot and Greek Myth" (1993). *The George Eliot Review*. 230.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/230>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Lesley Gordon

SOME NOTES ON GEORGE ELIOT AND GREEK MYTH

These notes comment first of all upon some points in Joseph Wiesenfarth's article 'Mythic Perspectives in George Eliot's Fiction' in *The George Eliot Review*, 24, 1993.

One of his interpretations of an allusion to Greek myth relates to Farebrother's remark to Lydgate that:

I am not a mighty man – I shall never be a man of renown. The choice of Hercules is a pretty fable; but Prodicus makes it easy to work for the hero, as if the first resolves were enough. Another story says that he came to hold the distaff, and at least wore the Nessus shirt. I suppose one resolve might keep a man right if everyone else's resolve helped him (Ch. 18, 218).¹

There is no evidence that, as Wiesenfarth claims, 'Lydgate thinks well of this Hercules' or that, as he further states, the doctor is displeased by the Hercules who holds the distaff and wears the Nessus shirt. Instead, part of the significance lies in the fact that this is one of the many allusions in the novel, by narrator or by characters, to 'heroes' in various fields of endeavour, references which help to establish and embellish the theme of heroism. In this case, Farebrother, despite his denial, does indeed become a hero of sorts in giving up the woman he loves, so making a Choice of Hercules in choosing the hard path of renunciation. Further, as Wiesenfarth also indicates, but in ways different from or additional to those he suggests, the remark adumbrates the future of the doctor. Though Lydgate, despite his faults, has the potential to be a hero of medicine, 'first resolves' – his medical ambitions – indeed will not be enough for this medical Hercules, 'one good resolve' not keeping him right because 'everyone else's', i.e. Rosamond's and those of the people of Middlemarch, do not. His fate will be to take the way of ease and 'to hold the distaff' in his submission to his wife, and to die, metaphorically wearing the Nessus shirt of his poisoned ambitions.

The allusion occurs at the end of a chapter, and Wiesenfarth's further remark that it is ironic that at the opening of the following chapter, Chapter 19, the reader should be shown Ladislaw standing in front of the Torso of Hercules in the Vatican unfortunately rests on an inaccurate perception. Will is not standing in front of the statue, but 'had just turned his back' on it (Ch. 19, 219), so indicating that 'abundant with uncertain promises' (Ch. 47, 512), he does not have Lydgate's potential for heroism.

Wiesenfarth's later contention that in *Romola* 'Ariadne is allied to Bacchus and seen as leading a carefree life with this "Care-Dispeller"' runs contrary to the facts of the novel if we equate Ariadne with *Romola* and Bacchus with *Tito*. Though *Tito* indeed regards himself and his wife as the mythical pair, *Romola* is always unhappy in the role he has imposed upon her, and, in the end, rejects it, when, in the words of the title of Chapter 36, 'Ariadne discrowns herself'. Nor do I find that in *Middlemarch* the story of Bacchus,

Ariadne, Theseus and the Minotaur is used architectonically, a point which Wiesenfarth argues in more detail in his *George Eliot's Mythmaking*.² Though there is some justification for his interpretation (for example, in the images of the labyrinth and in the sight of Dorothea standing by the statue of Ariadne), the case is overstated. The hints of this myth are no more than hints and are only part of the metaphorical plan of images of, on the one hand and relating to Casaubon, darkness, twisting and turning, and enclosure, and, on the other and relating to Ladislaw, of air, light and the sun. Wiesenfarth's final paragraph too is somewhat odd in the definitions it assigns to George Eliot's novels. In particular, I would say that, *Felix Holt*, far from being Greek middle comedy, is, in the tale of the Transomes, a powerfully written classic tragedy.

I would also like to respond to Derek Miller's 'A Note on Hermione in *Daniel Deronda*' in the same issue of *The George Eliot Review*. I am not sure that it is valid to interpret the Hermione who, in the novel, is clearly stated to be the wronged wife of *The Winter's Tale* in terms of the Greek Hermione; but I would also point out that Rex's suggestion that the tableau should consist of Briseis being led away by Agamemnon is significant. Events will show that he is wrong to think that such things are 'All gone by and done with' (Ch. 6, 90) when, much later, the reader learns that 'Grandcourt had an intense satisfaction in leading his wife captive in this fashion' (Ch. 54, 736); and it should be remembered too that the captor Agamemnon was to be murdered by his wife. The 'Greek wickedness' Mrs. Davilow fears (Ch. 6, 90) will, in a fashion, take place.

Notes

1. All references are to the Penguin editions of George Eliot's novels.
2. Joseph Wiesenfarth, *George Eliot's Mythmaking* (Heidelberg: 1977), 196-198.