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Pam Hirsch

WOMEN AND JEWS IN *DANIEL DERONDA*

When *Daniel Deronda* was first published in 1876 George Eliot was disappointed that readers tended to 'cut the book into scraps and talk of nothing in it but Gwendolen. I meant everything in the book to be related to everything else there'.¹ Her contemporary readers had failed to see the connections she had forged between the condition of Jews in British society and the condition of women in British society at a specific moment in history. By 1876 Jews in England had, like Dissenters and Catholics, been allowed to hold most public offices since 1828. In 1858 Rothschild had become the first Jewish MP, and the position of Jews in society had been strengthened by the Statute Law Revision Act of 1863. Nevertheless Marian Lewes knew well at least two Jewish men who had suffered disabilities simply because they were Jewish. The first is James Joseph Sylvester, a brilliant mathematician, who had attended St. John's College, Cambridge, but was prevented by his Jewish faith from taking a degree or a position on the faculty. Emmanuel Deutsch was another Jewish friend, whom Marian Lewes regarded as one of the greatest living Oriental scholars. He had come over from Germany in 1855 as an assistant in the British Museum and the Leweses met him in 1866. Like Sylvester, his career had suffered because he was a Jew. The portrayal of Mordecai in *Daniel Deronda* is in part a tribute to Deutsch. Similarly, George Eliot was closely in touch with the work of the Victorian women's movement. Women, by comparison with Jewish men, had even further to go. Once a woman married, she no longer existed as an independent legal person. George Eliot's closest friend, Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, the leader of the Langham Place Group, made the struggle to amend the Married Women's Property Act her first feminist campaign. The activism of the Victorian feminists was grounded in a study of women's history; this understanding helped to empower a new generation of women both in the sense of helping each other and being competent campaigners.² George Eliot's close friendships with Jewish men and the women of the Langham Place Group gave her insights into the plights of both groups and fed the creative imagination which produced *Daniel Deronda*.

The effect of the doubling of women and Jews in *Daniel Deronda* stresses the sense of *both* groups as being exiles, homeless and powerless. Although it was the only novel by George Eliot set in her own time, I am nevertheless going to argue that it was still an historical novel in a very precise sense. Christina Crosby has argued that in the Victorian period, with the disappearance of God and the consequent lack of the guarantee of immortality, *history* itself was produced as the truth of mankind. Using a broadly Foucaultian model, she goes on to say that:

Producing 'history' as the truth of man has very important social and political effects, for this project involved the articulation of rational western man as other to debased, irrational groups: 'Women' is such a category, a collectivity that is positioned outside of history proper, identified rather with the immediacy and intimacy of social life. 'Savages' and all 'primitive' men are another; either they stand at the threshold of history, or, like the Jews of Orientalism, are the outmoded remnants of an historical moment now past.³

In other words, European men constituted themselves as a superior form of human life by contrasting themselves with women and non-European men. Joanna de Groot has also emphasized that in the nineteenth century there were: 'not only similarities but structural connections between the treatment of women and of non-Europeans in the language, experience and imaginations of western men'.⁴ My claim is that in *Daniel Deronda* George Eliot is consciously drawing on these 'structural connections' in order to produce a radical argument about both groups.

George Eliot was familiar with the work of one of the leading contemporary Orientalists, Ernest Renan. She and George Lewes read his essays aloud to one another in 1859 and 1861. She met Renan in Paris in 1866. In his *Système comparé et histoire générale des langues sémitiques* (1848), Renan wrote:

In all things the Semitic race appears ... an incomplete race by virtue of its simplicity. The race – if I dare use the analogy – is to the Indo-European family what a pencil sketch is to painting; it *lacks* that variety, that amplitude, that abundance of life which is the condition of perfectibility. Like those individuals who possess so little fecundity that, after a gracious childhood they attain only the most mediocre vitality, the Semitic nations experienced their fullest flowering in their first age and have never been able to achieve true maturity.⁵

Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, comments: 'To my knowledge, there are very few moments in all of Renan's public writing where a beneficent and instrumental role is assigned to women.'⁶ Said does not go on to develop any argument from this comment but, as we have seen from the previous examples, 'experts' in the nineteenth century tended to discuss Orientals and women in much the same terms. Scientific, scholarly and legal discourses defined Orientals as passive, silent and mysterious. Similarly, 'the Woman Question' in Victorian England was a debate initially conducted by male 'experts'; women themselves had to struggle to make their own voices heard.⁷ *Daniel Deronda* contributes to these debates, in a speculative, rather than 'expert' mode.

Despite the surface realism of the text, George Eliot's use of mythology signals that her two protagonists are representative, as well as individual, figures. The mediaeval myth of the Wandering Jew underpins the character of Daniel Deronda; the earliest version of this myth recounts that it was the doorkeeper of Pontius Pilate who at the end of every hundred years falls into a trance and wakes up a young man of about thirty.⁸ Deronda is characterized as a man of about this age who does not know where he has come from. Furthermore, Deronda seems to have no direction until his identification as a Jew enables him to assume responsibility as a (political) leader. Pontius Pilate notoriously failed to take responsibility himself but threw responsibility back onto the Jews. Brewer's *Dictionary* also refers to German legend where the Wandering Jew is connected with the Wild Huntsman. Again, Deronda refers to hunting as a vice he cannot give up. Quinet's epic drama *Ahasverus* (1833), has as its hero the Wandering Jew who embodies mankind's search for the Absolute. Eugène Sue's *The Wandering Jew*, which George Eliot had read,

has as its central conceit a Jew and a Woman doomed to permanent exile until finally, at the end of six volumes, the woman says: '... I tell you, in us are ransomed women and the slaves of the day.'⁹ George Eliot's fascination with Heine's work is also relevant. Heine, like many of the same generation in Germany, converted to Christianity to avoid the civil disabilities suffered by Jews, yet at the end of his life reaffirmed his identity as a Jew.¹⁰ As an exceptional woman, George Eliot had as a young woman enjoyed being the 'token woman' in the company of intellectual men and had come to identify with the generality of women's experience later. In her representation of Gwendolen she associates her first with Diana, the goddess of virginity and, later, as a married woman, with Creusa, who was sent a poisoned dress and diadem when she married Jason by his cast-off mistress.

This weaving of mythological and literary references is suggestively deployed to suggest parallels between Gwendolen's position and Daniel Deronda's. At the beginning of the narrative, Daniel experiences the standard prejudices of his time against Jews and is anxious not to be identified with them. Gwendolen, likewise, has no wish to share the general fate of married women. Both Daniel and Gwendolen go through learning experiences which end with their identification with the groups they began by denying. However, in George Eliot's account, Jews as a group had the advantage of a sense of community, and a sense of their own history. At the beginning of the narrative, Gwendolen perceives other women only in terms of possible competition. This leads her to adopt one of two positions in relation to them – either one of fear or contempt. For example, the reader scarcely remembers the name of her half-sisters, and this is because we view them through Gwendolen's eyes. They cannot compete with Gwendolen, and therefore are of no account. Elsewhere in the book, the Meyrick sisters' friendship towards Myra is obliquely contrasted with Gwendolen's self-centredness. Gwendolen's progress towards taking up what Virginia Woolf called the 'burden and the complexity of womanhood' is painful; she learns to be a sister, both literally and figuratively, as the result of a series of shocks.¹¹ The first shock is Mrs. Glasher's revelation that Grandcourt has ruined her life. Lydia Glasher had left her husband and child out of love for Grandcourt; yet he is willing to discard her and their four children in order to marry Gwendolen. 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."¹² Nevertheless Gwendolen decides to marry Grandcourt, choosing to forget Lydia Glasher's history – that of a once beautiful woman cast aside. This forgetfulness, a refusal to face what history teaches, leads her into a nightmare.

Gwendolen is horribly punished by this refusal; as a married woman she soon learns that Grandcourt is master and she is slave, emblematically shown by the diamond choker displaced from his mistress's neck and onto Gwendolen's. However, George Eliot also subtly indicates that Gwendolen's amorality is a consequence of having no sense of 'home'. She has not had an early life 'well rooted in some spot of a native land ...'; she is in effect a displaced person.¹³ In George Eliot's moral landscape Gwendolen has no secure moral ground on which to stand. The English word 'ethics' comes from an ancient Greek term 'ethos' which originally meant accustomed place or abode. The word 'morality' similarly comes from the Latin word 'mos' meaning dwelling. Given this reading Gwendolen sim-

ply had no ground, materially or figuratively, from which to develop a morality.¹⁴ The young Jewish woman, Mirah, by contrast, although homeless in the conventional sense, has made her religion her home.¹⁵

George Eliot was surprised that her readers failed to recognise the deliberate doubling devices in *Daniel Deronda* because the *structure* of the book offers a series of obvious parallels. Like Gwendolen's contempt for women, Daniel has contempt for Jews and does not want to be associated with them. Daniel has to go through a series of learning experiences similar to Gwendolen's; despite his initial attempts to suppress information that will not fit comfortably with upper-class English life, he eventually aligns himself with the Jewish people, their history and their aspirations. At the beginning of the narrative, Daniel has no motive governing his life; he is aimless, until he takes on board his own Jewishness. It is only *after* he has made this identification – from the moment he pronounces to Mordecai 'I am a Jew' – that he becomes an activist.¹⁶ He explains to Gwendolen: 'The idea that I am possessed with is that of restoring a political existence to my people.'¹⁷ Firstly, as an act of free will, Daniel must accept being part of an oppressed group; only then can he become an activist leader. Such leaders are often referred to as visionaries. Alan Mintz writes: 'The essence of the visionary mode, the novelist tells us, is the capacity to see the world in a series of linked images that point beyond the world. This capacity, furthermore, is conferred on the exiled as a kind of power that arises from their disinherited position.'¹⁸

Everything remarked on in the previous paragraph can be matched by a parallel development for Gwendolen. After her initial denial of the claims of other women – those of her mother, her sisters, Mrs. Glasher – Gwendolen eventually comes to identify herself *as a woman*. Despite her deep fear at losing her double, Deronda, she does not, in fact, die. At the end of the narrative Gwendolen is identified with women, not a man, or men. The equivalent moment of Gwendolen's identification as a woman is after Deronda's identification as a Jew but, in narrative terms, not very long after. Gwendolen finally sees her mother, not as someone who serves her, but as a woman who has had her own pains, her own history: 'Ah, poor mamma! ... Don't be unhappy. I shall live. I shall be better.'¹⁹ Gwendolen has visions (like Mordecai), and it has always been stressed that she has leadership qualities. John Stuart Mill in *The Subjection of Women*, dismissed allegations of 'the greater nervous susceptibility of women' which was purported to render them incapable of anything but domestic life. He replied that:

There is indeed a certain proportion of persons, in both sexes, in whom an unusual degree of nervous susceptibility is constitutional ... It is the character of the nervous temperament to be capable of *sustained* excitement, holding out through long-continued efforts. It is what is meant by *spirit*. It is what makes the high-bred racehorse run without slackening speed till he drops down dead ... It is evident that people of this temperament are particularly apt for what may be called the executive department of the leadership of mankind.²⁰

Gwendolen, like Deronda, could become a leader; she is already the leader of her family. At the end of the novel her potential is (like Deronda's) unfixed, unmeasurable, if without guarantees. Her future as much as Deronda's is predicated upon a sense of a particular history and a commitment to a particular community. The influential twentieth-century critic F.R. Leavis stated baldly: 'There is no equivalent of Zionism for Gwendolen'.²¹ My argument is that her identification as a woman is the first and necessary condition of feminism; which was no more and no less utopian than Zionism in the nineteenth century. The final book of *Daniel Deronda* is called 'Fruit and Seed', which reversal surely implies that the history/future of the two protagonists is only now about to begin.

Notes.

- 1 George Eliot to Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, 2 October 1876. *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols. (New Haven: 1954-78), VI, 290.
- 2 Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon (1827-91) feminist activist and landscape painter. My thesis 'Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and George Eliot: an examination of their work and friendship' (Anglia Polytechnic University in collaboration with the University of Essex) gives a full account of their mutual influence.
- 3 Christina Crosby, *The Ends of History: Victorians and 'The Woman Question'* (London: 1991), p.2.
- 4 Joanna de Groot, ' "Sex" and "Race" ' in *Sexuality and Subordination*, eds. Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall (London: 1989), p.91.
- 5 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Harmondsworth: 1991), p.149, citing E. Renan, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris 1947-61), XIII, 156.
- 6 *Orientalism*, p.47.
- 7 Langham Place was the address of the *English Woman's Journal*, founded by Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and Bessie Rayner Parkes in 1858 to provide a forum for *women's* voices on subjects such as education and work for women.
- 8 Chronicle of St. Albans Abbey (1228) quoted in E.C. Brewer, *The Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (Leicester: 1988), p.1283.
- 9 Eugène Sue, *The Wandering Jew*, 6 vols. (Boston: 1900), VI, 365.
- 10 See François Fetjö, *Heine: A Biography*, trans. Mervyn Savill (London & Colchester: 1946).
- 11 Virginia Woolf, 'George Eliot', in *Women and Writing* (London: 1979), p.160.

- 12 *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Barbara Hardy (Harmondsworth: 1967), p.189.
- 13 *Daniel Deronda*, p.121.
- 14 Nicholas Capaldi, Eugene Kelly and Luis E.Navia, *An Invitation to Philosophy* (New York: 1981).
- 15 Fetjö, 'The bond which held their "land" wherein they had their roots, was a roll of parchment, the "Torah", the "transportable country" of the Jews – as Heine was later to call it' (p.19).
- 16 In my edition this occurs at page 816 out of a total of 883 pages.
- 17 *Daniel Deronda*, p.875. Political existence for women was also the aim of the Langham Place Group. The attempt to amend the Married Women's Property Act was the first stage; female enfranchisement was the ultimate goal.
- 18 Alan Mintz, *George Eliot and the Novel of Vocation* (London: 1978), p.154.
- 19 *Daniel Deronda*, p.879.
- 20 John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (London: 1906), pp. 88-89. John Stuart Mill worked with the women of the Langham Place Group to move an amendment to Representation of the People Bill (clause 4) to change the word 'man' to 'person', which would have achieved the vote for women of equivalent status to men. This move on 20 May 1867 was the start of the long campaign for female enfranchisement.
- 21 F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (Harmondsworth: 1980), p.102.