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PRIEST AND NUN?: DANIEL DERONDA, ANTI-CATHOLICISM AND THE CONFESSIONAL
by Kirstie Blair

In Chapter 32 of Daniel Deronda, Sir Hugo Mallinger jocularly remarks to Deronda, ‘You are always looking tenderly at the women, and talking to them in a Jesuitical way. You are a dangerous young fellow’.

Both Deronda’s defensive reaction and Eliot’s sly comment hint at the potential dangers of ‘peculiar’ flirtation with Gwendolen, a peculiarity linked to the term ‘Jesuitical’. Deronda’s guilty response here to being imaged for an instant as a Jesuit confessor intimately advising a female penitent, suggests that he cannot be unaware of the basis of his relationship with Gwendolen in confessional revelations. In the pervasive late Victorian discourse of anti-Catholicism, Jesuit priests are associated with insinuation, deception, persuasion, and seduction (whether literal or figurative). At the centre of this anti-Catholic rhetoric is a strong resistance to and stereotyping of the confessional. Deronda’s guilty response here to being imaged for an instant as a Jesuit confessor intimately advising a female penitent, suggests that he cannot be unaware of the basis of his relationship with Gwendolen in confessional revelations. Recent critical attention to confession in Daniel Deronda has centred on Foucauldian analysis of the power-relations in confessional discourse, neglecting the particular resonance of confession within 1870s anti-Catholicism. In contrast, in this article I examine the implications, in their historical context, of Eliot’s allusions to Catholicism in Daniel Deronda and show how the stereotypes of cunning priest and innocent penitent threaten to govern the actions of her leading characters. Confession provides the Victorian reader and Eliot’s characters with a readily identifiable model for Deronda’s and Gwendolen’s relationship, one that explains Deronda’s mysterious influence over Gwendolen, introduces a frisson of sexual unease, and indicates Deronda’s identity as a religious outsider.

Confession was one of the most fraught issues in Victorian anti-Catholic discourse. Attempts by the Tractarians to introduce auricular confession into the Anglican church in the 1830s and 40s sparked off a furore that lasted throughout the century. Tracts, pamphlets, novels and true-life stories which purported to reveal the horrors of the confessional were circulated, usually drawing upon lurid stories of priests who corrupted naïve, innocent women by inciting them to reveal familial, marital and even national secrets. G. H. Lewes, reviewing Jules Michelet’s immensely influential Priests, Women and Families (1845), sums up Michelet’s argument with: The priest, as confessor, possesses the secret of a woman’s soul, he knows every half-formed hope, every dim desire, every thwarted feeling. The priest [...] animates that woman with his own ideas, moves her with his own will, fashions her.

Lewes thoroughly agrees with Michelet that ‘the priest is but too often the lover of the woman whose conscience he directs’ and urges his readers to take action against the threat of Anglican confessions. In fact, his review itself became an influential anti-Catholic document, due to William Hogan’s five-page citation of it in his best-selling Auricular Confessions and Popish Nunneries (1845). G. I. T. Machin notes that anti-Catholicism died down somewhat after the controversies and conversions of the 1840s, but enjoyed a resurgence in the 1870s due to
debates over the Public Worship Bill, among other factors. The issue of confession, in particular, shot to prominence with the revelation of the publication of *The Priest in Absolution* (1866), a manual for Anglican confessors. Although the author barely hints at the possibility of sexual indiscretion between priest and female penitent, this was enough to cause uproar and a rush of condemnation. By 1877, the year after Daniel Deronda’s first serial publication (and the year before its appearance in the Cabinet edition of Eliot’s works), questions about *The Priest in Absolution* were being asked in Parliament, leading religious figures, such as the Dissenter Robert F. Horton, were advocating legal proceedings, and confession had once more been elevated to the status of a *cause célèbre* by the national press.

In such a climate, Eliot could hardly have been unaware that her descriptions of a beautiful and troubled young woman, heavily reliant on confessing her marital problems to a stranger of dubious birth and background, were highly suspect. She too had reviewed Michelet’s book and his co-authored volume, *The Jesuits*, in the 1840s, but although prepared to admit that he ‘gives some melancholy proofs of the too undeniable fact, that women have ever been the victims and the instruments of priestly despotism’, she was wary of his excessive claims and found the books ‘painful’ to read. Eliot’s own attitude towards Roman Catholicism moved from early Evangelical distaste to interest (particularly after her extensive research in Catholic history for *Romola* (1863)) and tolerance. Her friend Bessie Rayner Parkes was a Catholic convert, for instance, and in 1862 Eliot thanked her for sending some ‘precious books’ that were ‘just what I wanted – showing me the practical aspect of the Catholic Church in England in these times’. In 1880 she refused Elma Stuart’s plea to dissuade another acquaintance from conversion. Her few recorded comments on confession recognize its attraction: ‘I am always inclined to make a father-confessor of you’, she wrote to Rev. Watts in 1842 – but doubt its efficacy, ironically noting that it is ‘not the best check to frailty’. The temptation to confess, therefore, goes hand in hand with the rueful awareness that confession is not a straightforward solution – something that Gwendolen struggles to realize.

Father-confessors, in Victorian propaganda, are generally sinister, foreign, clever and falsely attractive: the danger lies in their ability to masquerade as acceptable members of British society, concealing their religious fanaticism and presumed devotion to the Roman Catholic cause. Despite his virtue and modesty, Deronda comes disturbingly close to possessing many of these traits. He is outside the Establishment and of doubtful class provenance. His Italian appearance immediately indicates his ‘foreign blood’ (Ch. 29, 378) and suggests effeminacy – Grandcourt accuses him of being a ‘fat’ (Ch. 35, 475). Brought up in the (Catholic) religious setting of Mallinger Abbey, Deronda remarks that ‘whenever I read of monks and monasteries, this was my scenery for them’ (Ch. 35, 476). Indeed, he is first seen in a ruined cloister reading such material, and comparing his own mysterious background to that of the illegitimate children of popes and cardinals (Ch. 16, 203). Deronda’s attitude towards ancient Catholicism is reverent. He bares his head in the converted monastery, for instance, provoking Grandcourt’s derogatory comments (possibly satirizing contemporary Ritualist controversies) about ‘fellows wanting to howl litanies’ (Ch. 35, 470). All these external appearances and indicators of religious sensibility could, and do, suggest Deronda’s Jewishness. But given that the signs for identifying Jews and Catholics in Victorian Britain were largely similar, the reader
might well become confused." By using Catholic references to hint at Deronda’s religious difference, Eliot both prepares the ground for Judaism and creates a false suggestion of Deronda’s priestly identity.

Hints about Deronda’s similarity to a Catholic priest imply that Eliot’s novel will follow an archetypal plot of anti-confessional rhetoric, in which the priest seduces or elopes with the penitent woman. Not only the reader, but also the novel’s characters (Sir Hugo, for instance) seem to see this plot in action in Deronda’s and Gwendolen’s relationship. As the novel progresses, and particularly in a series of charged encounters in chapters 35 and 36 during Gwendolen’s wedding visit to the Abbey, their meetings, always associated with religious language, increasingly evoke the confessional. They speak in private, in withdrawn recesses (advocates of confession insisted it should always take place in the open to avoid suspicion) with Gwendolen sitting or leaning on a chair in a penitential attitude. They are surrounded with indicators of Catholicism. When Deronda approaches Gwendolen after dinner, for instance, she is gazing at ‘a fine cowled head carved in ivory’, the antithesis to the worldliness she is starting to deplore. As she turns, Eliot comments, ‘they looked at each other – she seeming to take the deep rest of confession, he with an answering depth of sympathy that neutralised other feelings’ (Ch. 35, 464). The library where Gwendolen seeks Deronda at the end of chapter 36 is ‘as warmly odorous as a private chapel in which the censers have been swinging’ (505). Here she first confesses her marital problems, fulfilling propagandist warnings that the confessor would become the ‘depository of the secrets of the wife that the husband might not know’, threatening ‘the inmost sanctities of home’. And Deronda’s advice, exhorting her to seek ‘the higher, the religious life,’ (Ch. 36, 507), again places him as a spiritual advisor rather than a lover or even a confidant.

Gwendolen’s view of Deronda becomes explicit in these chapters:

Without the aid of sacred ceremony or costume, her feelings had turned this man, only a few years older than herself, into a priest; a sort of trust less rare than the fidelity that guards it. Young reverence for one who is also young is the most coercive of all: there is the same level of temptation, and the higher motive is believed in as a fuller force – not suspected to be a mere residue from weary experience. (Ch. 35, 485)

But Eliot makes it clear that such reverence for another fallible human is dangerous – rather than ‘being’ a force, the ‘higher motive’ is only ‘believed’ (my emphasis) to be one – hinting that only rare people can live up to this extreme confidence. The implications of ‘temptation’ here are left undefined (Eliot has already described Deronda’s attraction to Gwendolen with this word [Ch. 35, 464]). It could mean that the younger confidant is better able to sympathize with temptation and hence protect the confider from it, but also suggests that the ‘priest’ figure is himself or herself subject to temptation.

In conjunction with ‘coercive’, ‘temptation’ strongly recalls the rhetoric of anti-Catholic tracts warning of this precise dilemma: a young priest and female penitent who are led into tempta-
tion, rather than resisting it together. *The Priest in Absolution* suggests this failure may be inadvertent but its critics cite the use of coercion on the part of the priest. Alessandro Gavazzi, an ex-priest turned fervent propagandist, vividly evokes the dangerous position of susceptible young confessors:

> At this time of life, with little or no experience of the human heart, their own not excluded, how can they avoid falling into the snare of the most deceitful passions which surround their Confessional?

To some extent this seems like Deronda’s dilemma: his role as confessor puts his ‘rare fidelity’ to the test. Eliot’s final comment, however, ‘But the coercion is often stronger on the one who takes the reverence’(485), reverses expectations by making Deronda the victim of his role. In fact, it is Gwendolen who repeatedly initiates confessional scenes. Rather than being helplessly led into a threatening confessional relationship, she actively constructs Deronda as a priest – someone capable of saving her from herself and from Grandcourt.

From this point on, Gwendolen’s belief in Deronda and desire to speak to him become increasingly desperate and compromising, in line with the gloomy prophecy of anti-Catholic writers, that women who take to confession will rapidly develop a ‘mania’ for it, causing them to neglect their domestic and familial duties. ‘I suppose you take Deronda for a saint’ (Ch. 48, 649), Grandcourt sneers. Like a persecuted devotee, she cherishes her belief ‘as a Protestant of old kept his Bible hidden or a Catholic his crucifix’ (Ch. 48, 655). Eliot wryly notes:

> Husbands in the old time are known to have suffered from a threatening devoutness in their wives [...] ending in that mild form of lunatic asylum, the nunnery. (655)

Debates over Anglican sisterhoods were highly topical in the nineteenth century, so while ‘lunatic asylum’ gently criticizes extreme devotion, ‘old time’ may be ironic. It is becoming unlikely that Deronda’s, and Gwendolen’s relationship will lead to the seduction anticipated by anti-Catholic writers, but the alternative – the convent – is still a possibility. Indeed, in a final meeting with Deronda before Grandcourt’s death, solicited by Gwendolen, she self-consciously dresses in black and wears a black lace veil or mantilla such as those worn in Catholic churches. When Grandcourt interrupts the scene, ‘What he saw was Gwendolen’s face of anguish framed black like a nun’s, and Deronda standing three yards from her with a look of sorrow’ (Ch. 48, 673). Not quite adultery, but for a Victorian husband to catch his wife in the act of confession was almost equivalent.

Deronda’s ‘look of sorrow’ here is born of the realization that he cannot promise the help Gwendolen seeks. The ‘other feelings’ that he ‘neutralised’ (464) in order to respond sympathetically, and which showed his uneasiness from the start about his intimacy with Gwendolen, have become too strong. As the Jewish plot of the novel advances, and he becomes increasingly enamoured of Mirah and influenced by Mordecai, his new commitments draw him away from Gwendolen’s troubles. ‘I seldom find I do any good by my preaching’ (Ch. 45, 624), he tells her. Initially flattered by her confidence, he is painfully aware that others would readily
interpret it as sexual, and that he is being trapped in the ambiguous and inappropriate position of the 'priest'. In the climactic scene with Gwendolen after Grandcourt’s death:

She was bent on confession, and he dreaded hearing her confession. Against his better will, he shrank from the task that was laid on him: he wished [...] that she could bury her secrets in her own bosom. He was not a priest. (Ch. 56, 754)

Deronda partly fears that Gwendolen will actually confess to murder, but he is also conscious that his mother’s revelation of his Jewish identity means that his duty lies elsewhere. With that crucial admission, ‘He was not a priest’, Deronda finally rejects the part in which Gwendolen (and to some extent the reader) has cast him. He is not a (Catholic) priest, and he can now definitively state this because he does have a religious identity, albeit one even more foreign to the majority of Victorian readers: he is a Jew.

Expectations that the novel would end with Deronda’s and Gwendolen’s marriage, in part set up by the emphasis on their intimate moments of confession, are thwarted in Eliot’s clever, gradual transformation of one meaning of a set of religious signifiers into another. The Jewish plot gradually overlays the Gwendolen-Deronda plot so that in retrospect all indications of religion come to be signs of Judaism. But Gwendolen is only an agent in one half of the novel. While Deronda gladly abandons the position of priest and confessor, she becomes trapped in a nun-like role. Transformed from a proud and confident woman into a ‘crushed penitent impelled to confess her unworthiness’ (Ch. 58, 771), Gwendolen ends the novel retiring into seclusion for a life of ‘acceptance of rebuke – the hard task of self-change – confession – endurance’ (Ch.65, 842). Eliot actually anticipated this fate in an earlier chapter heading implicitly referring to Grandcourt’s abandoned mistress, Lydia Glasher:

No penitence and no confessional:
No priest ordains it, yet they’re forced to sit
Amid deep ashes of their vanished years. (Ch. 30, 384)

The outward trappings of Catholicism are negated in a pre-emptive move that suggests that genuine penitence and confession are internalized. By introducing, here and throughout the novel, the stereotypical framework of priest, penitent and confession, Eliot reveals their power to influence the beliefs and actions of her contemporary Victorian characters. But ultimately these models are inadequate. Deronda finds priesthood outside Christianity altogether in Zionism, and Gwendolen is left to learn true repentance and goodness alone, without the help of any father-confessor.

Notes


