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An Unsympathetic Network: Female Defiance as Narrative Force in *Daniel Deronda*

RIYA DAS

SINCE SHARON MARCUS'S LANDMARK *Between Women*, critics have tended to understand female friendship as crucial to both the forward motion and productive conclusions of Victorian marriage plots. However, in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, it is female *antagonism*, rather than cooperation, that drives the plot. Lydia, afraid for her future should her former lover Grandcourt marry another woman, arranges a secret meeting with Gwendolen. Lydia requests female solidarity—a promise from Gwendolen to reject Grandcourt's proposal of marriage. And Gwendolen, in an apparent show of such solidarity, agrees:

The two women's eyes met again, and Gwendolen said proudly, "I will not interfere with your wishes." She looked as if she were shivering, and her lips were pale.

"You are very attractive, Miss Harleth. But when he first knew me, I too was young. Since

KEYWORDS: George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, female friendship, marriage plot, network, gender

ABSTRACT: In *Daniel Deronda*, female aberrations from social norms are not straightforwardly punished, nor are unruly women linked together in friendships. Instead, women form an unsympathetic network, each defying socially prescribed roles but also unable to extend solidarity to the rest. This collective network threatens to upset conventional gender structures, disrupts the goals of British imperial masculinity, and propels the narrative. Thus this article challenges the perception of female friendship as a requisite for a conventional happy ending in the Victorian marriage plot.

then my life has been broken up and embittered. It is not fair that he should be happy and I miserable, and my boy thrust out of sight for another.” (126; ch. 14)

Initially impressed by Lydia’s dignified appearance, Gwendolen reacts not with understanding but with coldness when she learns about Lydia’s affair with Grandcourt and their illegitimate children. Gwendolen’s response is delivered “proudly,” not sympathetically. Hers is a pride of perceiving herself to be in an elevated moral and economic position compared to Lydia, and her reply, therefore, is not laced with typical feminine displays of solidarity. There is no hug, no tears, no mutual denunciation of Grandcourt, whose villainy is the cause behind their meeting—not even an emotional acknowledgment of their common struggles as women. In lieu of physical contact, only their *eyes* meet.

Gwendolen’s choice of words is noteworthy as well. Unlike earlier in the scene, when enchanted by Lydia’s appearance she readily promises secrecy, here she does not offer a “promise.” Given this serious opportunity to extend solidarity, she simply offers to “not interfere.” Lydia’s fall from dignified to disgraced in Gwendolen’s eyes renders the latter incapable of offering a sincere feminine assurance of help. Gwendolen and Lydia’s interactions begin not with friendship but with a contest, as they stand in perfect antagonism, each hoping to leverage a more comfortable social position via marriage to the same man. Ultimately their interests align, as Lydia is desperate to secure her right and Gwendolen is too proud to want a man with a sordid past. But surprisingly, even then, they display no solidarity and continue to be driven by self-interest. Gwendolen is able only to muster a dry, contractual agreement of not interfering in a situation she finds repellent. Gwendolen’s response is further elicited by her own selfish desire to escape domesticity—Lydia’s plea is her lucky ticket to freedom.¹

For both women in the scene, therefore, *unsympathetic* personal desire drives individual agency. Lydia’s request comes from her aversion to another woman who may usurp her rights, and Gwendolen’s reaction comes from her own personal aspirations. This unsympathetic female agency plays a vital role in the narrative’s progress. Following her meeting with Lydia, Gwendolen leaves Offendene and takes the narrative to its beginning in Leubronn, a setting Eliot privileges as the opening chronotope of the novel. While in Leubronn, Gwendolen learns of her family’s financial ruin and realizes that she is once again in competition with Lydia for social survival. She must either rescind her already unsympathetic “solidarity,” or else deny herself social and material security through marriage to Grandcourt. The lack of sympathy between

the two women makes it easy for Gwendolen to pursue her own best interests and disregard the claims of the other woman. *Daniel Deronda* therefore upsets the concept of unequivocal female amity, not only by testing the limits of mid-Victorian female conventionality, but also by rejecting the expectation of productive female solidarity.

In fact, this expectation of female solidarity in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction has largely stemmed from late twentieth-century critical thinking. Books such as Nina Auerbach's *Communities of Women* (1978), Janet Todd's *Women's Friendship in Literature* (1980), Pauline Nestor's *Female Friendships and Communities* (1985), and several others indicate a new focus on female friendship. Some of these critics, such as Nestor, explore nineteenth-century women authors and their participation in female writing communities. Others like Todd provide "a very thorough and illuminating analysis of female friendship in eighteenth-century English and French fiction" (Abel 414n1). This emphasis on solidarity has since lingered in critical studies with publications such as Leela Gandhi's *Affective Communities* (2006), which argues that friendship enabled marginalized groups to resist dominant power structures. Theories of Victorian women's relationships have also generally focused on positive affective connections. Sharon Marcus points out that "Victorians accepted friendship between women because they believed it cultivated the feminine virtues of sympathy and altruism that made women into good helpmates" (26). And this female propensity to help one another generated happy marriages in Victorian novels—in fact, female friendship and heterosexual marriage in a Victorian narrative are often indistinguishable, as "friends experience the sorts of communion associated with spouses" (93).² Therefore, Victorian society, which intensely valued heterosexual marriages, actively encouraged female friendships (26). Critics have read *Daniel Deronda* in a similar vein, noting the importance of the connection between Gwendolen and Lydia but concentrating on their solidarity. Gilbert and Gubar, for instance, argue that Gwendolen is acutely aware of Grandcourt's mistreatment of Lydia, claiming that she identifies with her as his victim (495). However, female friendship and cooperation is hardly a given in the Victorian marriage plot, where unquestioning solidarity can often be detrimental to the well-being of female characters. Thus, the continued critical focus on solidarity has meant that the political value of antagonism has gone overlooked. As we will see in *Daniel Deronda*, a woman gets ahead by looking out for her own interests, not those of other women.

For many of the novel's women characters, solidarity would in fact be a self-defeating choice. Marcus points out that there is a connection between female friendships and happy marriages—the unfriendly woman's feelings

for women and men alike take shape as pain and privation, and, as a result, friendless women have unfulfilling marriages (107–08). However, friendship between Gwendolen and Lydia in place of their separate modes of struggle would hardly make marriage easier for either of them. Gwendolen and Lydia could have banded together against Grandcourt to spare Gwendolen her anguished marital life. But they do not, because by acting together, neither of them could be happy in any of the possible scenarios—if Gwendolen chose not to marry Grandcourt, she would be forced into a servitude she abhors, while Lydia would have ended up at the brunt of Grandcourt’s scorn. Even if he did marry Lydia begrudgingly, the marriage would be mentally and physically torturous for her. Alternatively, Grandcourt, with his attractive social position and wealth, could pursue another woman, leaving Gwendolen, once again, facing servitude and Lydia in a loop of begging, yet again, for female solidarity. Ultimately, solidarity between Lydia and Gwendolen could do nothing to alter Grandcourt’s villainy or help them easily achieve their respective objectives of legitimacy and financial stability. Solidarity would only prolong their role as vulnerable women in a patriarchal system. Instead of fatalistically embracing this perpetual vulnerability, each woman actively seeks to improve her circumstances at the other’s expense—Gwendolen marries Grandcourt, and Lydia attempts to ruin the marriage by returning the jewels on her own terms.

Daniel Deronda tests the limits of women’s abilities to extend friendship to one another, since—especially in the case of Lydia and Gwendolen—doing so would compromise their pursuit of their own advancement. Thinking of the two women as friends overlooks Gwendolen’s active self-preservation in marrying Lydia’s lover, and also reduces Lydia’s noticeable indifference to a victim’s helplessness.³ Instead, both women display distinctly unsympathetic agency as they struggle to overcome their own circumstances. Throughout the novel, in fact, women try to actively overcome their vulnerabilities in isolation rather than passively share them as friends. In place of female friendship, then, an entirely distinct, more complicated, and altogether less sympathetic dynamic is at work in *Daniel Deronda*. The novel offers a less picture-perfect vision of how women relate to one another while pursuing social advancement, particularly as they experience precarious socioeconomic conditions. In the absence of economic or social power, women resort to unapologetic defiance as their ultimate weapon against oppressive social norms. This defiance makes specific female friendships impossible, but it does link women together in a surprising kind of *unsympathetic* network, composed of the resistances and antagonisms necessary for each woman to pursue her own social advancement. Marcus argues that female friendship is a “narrative matrix,” that it

“generates plot but is not its primary agent, subject, or object” (79). Women’s friendships, in other words, are narratively productive. In this article, I demonstrate that the reverse is true: female *antagonism* forms a robust network central to Eliot’s novel, and it is this unsympathetic defiance, not friendship, that shapes plot. From positions of extremely limited power, women may not be able to afford to extend female friendship, but their individual defiances collectively engender new possibilities marked, in Eliot’s novel, by its unconventional, open-ended conclusion.

Methodologically, this article bridges historicist and formalist analyses. Seeing the women’s refusal to surrender to masculinist social norms requires a grounding in the context of Victorian gender roles. But a formalist sensibility—informed here by Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory and Caroline Levine’s explication of the forms and affordances of a network—reveals how these women’s recalcitrance has all the dynamics of a network, constantly shaping the plot and producing new narrative possibilities for women. A formalist understanding of the novel is therefore enriched by a historicist evaluation of gender and a gendered understanding of history.

Unconventionally Resisting Solidarity

Eliot notably breaks convention with her novel, which is itself invested in testing women’s abilities to challenge convention. *Daniel Deronda* is firmly situated in the mid-Victorian sociocultural milieu, and yet it upsets the mid-Victorian mold in key ways. One of those is its looping temporal structure. Another is its disruption of the conventions of literary realism.⁴ Realist novels usually refrain from portraying extreme heroism or evil, but *Daniel Deronda* presents in Leonora “the first woman character who attempts, with some success, to break from the limits of what is thought to be in the power of women,” and in Grandcourt an “unequivocally evil man” (G. Levine, *Cambridge Companion* 16–17). The novel’s refusal to meet the expectations of the conventional Victorian novel is especially visible in its depiction of marriages. The traditional mid-Victorian fictional marriage resulted in satisfied domestic stability and healthy offspring, but marriages in *Daniel Deronda* are turbulent, and women often find respite not in marriage and motherhood, but in widowhood.⁵

And indeed, unconventionality also defines nearly every female character in Eliot’s novel. Leonora’s rebellion against the demands of a patriarchal society is perhaps the most visible, but all the women display recalcitrance in varying degrees. Catherine defies her parents and marries a Jewish musician, Mirah runs away from her father in search of her brother, Lydia has an extramarital affair and gives birth to illegitimate children, and Gwendolen aspires to

a life free of domesticity. Even soft-spoken characters like Gwendolen's mother, Mrs. Davilow, occasionally betray defiance—on being told by Mrs. Gascoigne that Gwendolen needs to marry and settle down, she becomes “rather saucy” from “mild” as she thinks, “You will not get her to marry for your pleasure” (Eliot 76; ch. 9).

Daniel Deronda lucidly depicts the patriarchal constraints that justify such breaches with convention, either with male control over women's futures or harmful male intervention in women's lives. For instance, the novel shows how women's futures are radically affected by male judgment when Klesmer's pending verdict causes Mirah's artistic future to hang in the balance. The Meyrick sisters go from disdain to adoration, to failing adoration, to heartfelt “esteem” for Klesmer as he gradually moves from silence to acknowledgment of Mirah's musical talent (409–10; ch. 39). Their reactions fluctuate speedily, mimicking the dynamic changes in the larger socioeconomic conditions affecting women's circumstances. The Meyrick sisters' nervous fluctuation of feeling, as they wait for a male expert to slap a verdict on a woman's prospects, demonstrates the ever-changing situations women encounter as patriarchal mandates give or take away future possibilities. Women possess limited scope for static considerations of their circumstances, resulting in a diminished capacity for unwavering sympathy for others. They are able to afford sympathy only when nothing is at stake—the Meyrick women help Mirah to get on her feet because they have nothing to lose, but Gwendolen cannot continue helping Lydia because of the sudden change in her economic circumstances.

Eliot repeatedly illustrates the “elevation” of men above women, sometimes veiling it under familial affection. Taller Mordecai “look[s] down at [Mirah] tenderly” at their meeting (491; ch. 47). Anna Gascoigne is twice described as a “tiny copy”—first of her father (24; ch. 3) and then of her older brother (71; ch. 8)—dooming her to exist as a lesser replica of her male relatives. This feminine disadvantage transcends race and class. Ezra Cohen's infant daughter reflects her older brother's antics—“Adelaide Rebekah always cried when her brother [Jacob] cried” (485; ch. 46). The Jewish shopkeeper's daughter effectively becomes a “tiny copy” of her brother, just like Anna. The abundance of abusive or controlling fathers in their lives adds to the patriarchal constraints women must contend with.⁶ The novel makes no secret of the fact that Gwendolen's stepfather traumatized her in some way.⁷ Leonora's father, Daniel Charisi, treated her as a mere cog in the perpetuation of a masculine religious tradition, eliciting fearful awe from her. Mirah's father's amorality prompted him to try to sell her, and later to steal from her. Catherine's father, Mr. Arrowpoint, represents the English gentleman on his way to redundancy,

made amply clear by the assertion his wife forces out of him during their confrontation with Catherine about her choice of husband—"I am a gentleman, Cath. We expect you to marry a gentleman" (207; ch. 22). Mr. Arrowpoint's existence is defined merely by the hollow social standing of "gentleman." His role as a gentleman is restricted to his efforts to ensure that his daughter sacrifices intellectual fulfillment and marries into the same social class to maintain appearances. Despite their separate plotlines or characteristic dissimilarities, all women in Eliot's novel are struggling against social constraints. The collective resistance from the women's network is therefore justified not only by the larger conceptual "patriarchal society" but by its manifestation in their immediate personal existence in the form of ineffective or harmful fathers.

But this resistance to social convention also requires that each woman resist friendship with other women. One key dynamic in the novel is that one woman's pain often translates to another woman's gain, as each woman reacts uniquely to her circumstances. Marcus has pointed out that Victorian female friendship "trained women not to compete with one another; it fostered feminine vulnerability by developing bonds based on a shared 'capability of receiving pain'" (39).⁸ But the plurality of women's circumstances and emotions in *Daniel Deronda* often prevents them from sharing pain. For instance, Mirah's trust of Daniel despite her distressing past experiences with men contrasts with Gwendolen's intense response after she learns about Grandcourt's affair with Lydia: "I believe all men are bad, and I hate them" (128; ch. 14). And for women in the novel, pain is meant to be dealt with not through sisterly support but alone. Pain is either endured alone or remedied by individual industriousness. Lydia expects Gwendolen to play a major role in assuaging her pain by stepping aside so that she may marry Grandcourt. But Lydia is more responsible for her predicament than Gwendolen (Szirotny 175). Moreover, Gwendolen's assistance would be unlikely to deliver Lydia from her predicament, as Grandcourt never displayed any interest in marrying her (Rosenman 240). Gwendolen herself entertains similar thoughts before her marriage: "He could have married her if he liked; but he did *not* like. Perhaps she is to blame for that" (Eliot 261; ch. 28). In her thoughts, Gwendolen justifies her unsympathetic pragmatism in marrying Grandcourt with the consolation that her sympathy for Lydia would be useless. Interestingly, Gwendolen is waited on by "mother, sisters, governess, and maids" who aid and abet the purposeless hedonism of her early life (18; ch. 3). Ironically, in order to help her acquire a firm purpose in life, her female appeasers at home need to decrease their sympathy for her instead of encouraging her selfishness.

But traditional Victorian sisterly bonds are mostly absent in the novel. Such limitations to female sympathy have not gone unnoticed.⁹ Often, one

woman's desire to control her own fate in a man's world is what gets in the way of her sympathetic connection to other women. When Gwendolen rejects Rex's romantic advances, for instance, she is also rejecting a domestic future that has been plotted out for her by society. But this causes Anna to feel internal antipathy toward her, and causes Mrs. Gascoigne, even though she is relieved by the rejection, to judge Gwendolen a coquette (69; ch. 8). Even the angelic Mirah betrays her lack of sympathy for Gwendolen when the latter threatens to stand in her way—"this woman who belonged to another world than hers and Ezra's—nay, who seemed another sort of being than Deronda, something foreign that would be a disturbance in his life instead of blending with it" (616; ch. 61). The reality of women's socioeconomic limitations results in their inability to offer sympathy to other women without hurting themselves. This is in sharp contrast to the overly sympathetic Daniel, who is able to help multiple people without diminishing his own future because he possesses aristocratic masculinity. But women, who have limited power in all spheres—material, aspirational, social—cannot afford sympathy. Defiance is the currency they have to spend, and while it helps them negotiate their own desires, it also keeps them at odds with one another. No two women are the same in *Daniel Deronda*, and therefore limited sympathy has a two-fold function—it motions toward each woman's unique needs, which may not command sympathy from women facing different challenges, and it results in effective female agency.

A Network of Unsympathetic Women

In a famous assertion about *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot states that she "meant everything in the book to be related to everything else" (Eliot and Cross 209).¹⁰ One prominent example of this is the vital relationship between Gwendolen's and Daniel's plots; despite the unlikelihood of their connection, they are tightly networked together, both socially and formally. In his description of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), Bruno Latour argues that "it is best to begin . . . *in medias res*" because the middle of a narrative is inundated with relativist controversy rather than stability, which renders "social connections traceable" (27, 30). And indeed, *Daniel Deronda* begins in *medias res* with Gwendolen and Daniel's first meeting before returning to the chronological beginning of the story. The misalignment of *fabula* and *syuzhet* compels the reader not to track a beginning but rather a relationship, specifically that between Daniel and Gwendolen. But despite the critical attention to Gwendolen and Daniel's relationship, this connectivity is also ubiquitous among the novel's women, who are linked by their resistance to social constraints: "Gwendolen's life is

touched by four other women—Catherine Arrowpoint, Lydia Glasher, Leonora Charisi, and Mirah Cohen—against whom her own resistance to patriarchal failure and control is measured,” and the women exhibit common struggles through both their defiance of social mores and the internal turmoil that results (Pell 425; Dolin 151).

This interconnectedness—what I refer to as the women’s network—seeps across social classes, racial cultures, and scales of morality. Socially and culturally disparate women often share characteristics, juxtaposing illegitimate mistress Lydia’s “equivocal position” with legitimate wife Lady Mallinger’s fascination with “equivocal objects,” or the “makeshift” Mallinger daughters with Leonora’s role as “makeshift link” in her father’s plan (Wynne 10–11; sec. 3). Mr. Vandernoodt, an otherwise inconsequential character, ominously says how “Grandcourt [is] between two fiery women. For . . . this light-haired one has plenty of devil in her” (Eliot 365; ch. 36). This further strengthens the association of women with one another, irrespective of matrimonial legitimacy, by putting together Lydia’s and Gwendolen’s recalcitrance and promptly categorizing both as fiery and devilish. In *Daniel Deronda*, everything seems to connect—recalcitrant women in particular.

Their struggles result in a formidable network of women’s resistance that shapes the plot of the novel. Latour argues that, in a network, anything that causes observable change is an actor. A “good ANT account,” according to Latour, is:

a narrative or a description or a proposition where all the actors *do something* and don’t just sit there. Instead of simply transporting effects without transforming them, each of the points in the text may become a bifurcation, an event, or the origin of a new translation. As soon as actors are treated not as intermediaries but as mediators, they render the movement of the social visible to the reader. (128)

An actor brings about change—it is a “mediator” that “transform[s], translate[s], distort[s], and modif[ies] the meaning or the elements [it is] supposed to carry” (39).¹¹ Latour further notes that “ANT claims to be able to find order much better after having let the actors deploy the full range of controversies in which they are immersed,” instead of assuming a preexisting order, because “[t]he task of defining and ordering the social should be left to the actors themselves, not taken up by the analyst” (23). Caroline Levine also points out the importance of examining connections between actors instead of presuming causality (*Forms* 113). This is a difficult feat to achieve with a

realist narrative, even one as unconventional as *Daniel Deronda*. The imperial ending, the contextual social rigidity, and the conspicuous presence of patriarchal values all seem to announce a preexisting order and obscure the kinds of connections that might produce change or resistance. And yet, the network of unsympathetic women does just that.

Caroline Levine describes the connective elements of a network as “*path length*, which counts the number of links that separate nodes; *network centrality*, which analyzes the popularity and importance of a node to the whole network; *hubs*, objects or persons that play a role in more than one cluster of nodes; and *hinges*, nodes that connect otherwise separate groups” (*Forms* 113). These functions of a network are manifested in the women’s interconnectedness in *Daniel Deronda*. Taking each woman in *Daniel Deronda* as a node, *path lengths* vary considerably across the women’s network, depending on the women and their attributes. For instance, Mirah occupies the same spot as the Meyrick sisters in that they all earn a modest living through their respective talents and live in the same household for a considerable period. Yet, when one considers racial identity, Mirah’s difference from the Meyricks increases the path length between them. Gwendolen occupies *network centrality* by virtue of her principal role in one of the stories in the double narrative. Gwendolen’s centrality enables her to affect multiple women—she threatens Lydia through her association with Grandcourt, she makes Mirah insecure through her association with Daniel, and she makes Catherine uncomfortable when she elicits Klesmer’s critique of her musical talent. Catherine acts as a *hub*, as she can be identified within multiple clusters of femininity. On one hand, like Gwendolen, she is one of the single women in the marriage market. On the other hand, like Leonora, she is a rare sole female heir to a family’s cultural and material legacy. Finally, Leonora is an example of a *hinge*. She connects Mirah to her rightful “group,” that is, completes Mirah’s purpose in the narrative, by revealing that the man who found her family also belongs to it in the larger racial sense.

But more important than these manifestations of a network in the women’s plots, what is significant here is that the connectivity between women in Eliot’s novel occurs through their isolated acts of defiance, not friendship. Notably, Leonora’s connective role in Mirah’s plot simultaneously upsets Gwendolen’s by dissolving her passionate attachment to Daniel. After Leonora—a woman she has never met—intervenes, Gwendolen is compelled to pick up the pieces and fashion a new plan for her future. This demonstrates the dynamism of the network: a hinge connects separate groups but may consequently disconnect others, altering the course of the narrative. As “no

tie can be said to be durable,” and “[i]t’s the work, and the movement, and the flow, and the changes that should be stressed,” the network of women is constantly in motion, altering the narrative with its effects (Latour 66, 143). All of these women are pursuing unconventionality, which often leaves them unable to be friends and yet makes them powerful actors in each other’s and, consequently, the novel’s plots.

The women’s network in *Daniel Deronda* interacts with other structures that it affects and is affected by. It constantly collides with other structures, such as the men’s narratives, social mores, national/imperial ideology, artistic/domestic ambition, and so on.¹² Latour points out the importance of interactions: “To use the word ‘actor’ means that it’s never clear who and what is acting when we act since an actor on stage is never alone in acting. . . . Action is borrowed, distributed, suggested, influenced, dominated, betrayed, translated” (46). Gwendolen’s decision to leave Offendene and head to Leubronn is hardly an independent act by her, and it is the result of multiple interventions by other actors. It is fueled by her secret rendezvous with Lydia, whose arrangement of the meeting, with considerable help from Mr. Lush, results in Gwendolen’s decision to abandon her plans of marriage, leading to the chronological movement of the narrative to Leubronn. Gwendolen and Lydia can hardly be called friends; rather, they are two women each hoping to bend the same man to their will, and their pursuit of a power not typically granted to women places them in a dynamic tension with each other. This linkage has the power to change the fortunes of the men standing in their way (Grandcourt and Lush) and also to drive the narrative into new places. The novel’s multitude of similar interactions not only shapes the narrative but also transforms the futures of women in notable, if not radical, ways.

Networked Disruption of Social Mores

The momentous scene in which Grandcourt proposes marriage to Gwendolen most accurately encapsulates the novel’s ethos of female defiance. When Grandcourt asks, “Is there any man who stands between us?,” the narrator describes Gwendolen’s unspoken reply: “Inwardly the answer framed itself. ‘No; but there is a woman’” (Eliot 252; ch. 27). There is always a woman attempting to disrupt a man’s plan in the novel. The women drive the narrative forward with their forceful disruptions, and they simultaneously reroute the narrative, standing in the way of the traditional fulfillment of a patriarchal, imperial telos. I contend that *Daniel Deronda’s* unusual forms and unusual women are complementary phenomena; the women’s recalcitrance over social norms produces the formal disruption of a potentially traditional marriage plot.

The title of the novel alone seems to set expectations that this will be a man's story, or at least one driven by male agency. A young Daniel surmises that "he must have been taken away" from his mother (139; ch. 16). Even a child presupposes no agency in his unknown mother, instead imagining that some external masculine force separated her from her maternal duty. For all his fears of illegitimacy, Daniel never fears maternal abandonment, revealing the power of the social assumption that women are not in control of their marital and reproductive lives. And in contrast, Daniel himself does appear to be the ultimate masculine driving force of the novel—specifically as a result of his sympathy. Daniel, through "sympathy, curiosity, and relentless coincidence," brings all the characters together (Schor 66, 68). Daniel's relentless sympathy is of course possible for him in ways that it is not for women, who face social and material limitations. But it is not particularly effective in producing the narrative. Daniel's sympathetic intervention only brings about domestic narratives—bringing Mirah to the Meyrick household, reuniting Mirah with Ezra, and counseling Gwendolen. Thus, Daniel helps form domestic units, a traditionally feminine role that the main women characters in the novel do not fulfill. In fact, Daniel's ability to affect the narrative is severely limited by his ignorance about his identity. Only Leonora can reveal it to him, enabling his plot to move forward into marriage and social purpose.¹³ The network of unruly women, who dare to strip men of their identities and allow them to perish if needed—who dare to be *unsympathetic*—produces the plot. Defiant women, who cannot afford female solidarity or even maternal instinct, can still resist a male-dominated society together from their unique points of existence. They are capable of jeopardizing male fulfillment, and consequently affect the plot of the narrative as a whole, even more than the male characters.

This defiant female agency also complicates the understanding of mid-Victorian transmission, defined legally by primogeniture, as male. In Eliot, women clearly can transmit moral values. After hearing Mirah's detailed account of her life, Mrs. Meyrick, "with rapid decisiveness," pronounces that Mirah's mother must be "[a] good woman" to have given birth to such a good daughter, but adds that Mirah's brother "might be an ugly likeness of the father" (186–87; ch. 20). The inheritance of elevated morals runs from mother to daughter, excluding male offspring as suspect. Mrs. Meyrick's verdict reiterates the traditional assumption of being morally good as feminine, yet alters the idea of morality from passively female to a powerful attribute that women can pass along. Thus, women are capable of transmitting identity. Just as Mirah's mother is assumed to have transmitted her higher morals to her daughter, Leonora's transmissive role is indicated when Joseph Kalonymos

approaches Daniel with a query: “[W]hat is your parentage—your mother’s family—her maiden name?” (308; ch. 32). Daniel, who intensely speculates about his father early in the novel, is unaware that an unknown mother can render a child illegitimate as much as an unknown father can (136–54; ch. 16).¹⁴ Therefore, the importance of maternal transmission is repeatedly demonstrated in the novel, with mothers remarkably affecting their offspring with their actions. The pivotal role of female transmission is further substantiated by the fact that the novel is inundated with women who are either fatherless or who suffer detrimental paternal intervention in their lives. Mothers transmit values and identities to their offspring more forcefully than fathers do in *Daniel Deronda*.

Ubiquitous female defiance amid a traditional mid-Victorian setting in *Daniel Deronda* makes it difficult to measure women’s progress. Langland argues that “George Eliot’s men made their destinies; the women simply fulfilled theirs” (185). This partially applies to *Daniel Deronda*, because its women do play a role in the male imperial narrative. The unsympathetic network of women is able to dynamically disrupt and move the narrative, but is not forceful enough to entirely derail male quests. Eliot ultimately writes a masculine imperial narrative through Daniel’s character. Men usually win their gambles through fortuitous coincidence in order to bring the imperial narrative to fruition. Women are beckoned by a masculinist society to automatically aid the British imperial agenda.¹⁵ Daniel concocts his version of Grandcourt’s death to put Gwendolen’s mind at ease and thwart her emotional dependence on him because, if he chose her, Mordecai’s vision would suffer (Newton xix–xx). Daniel delicately shields himself from Gwendolen’s crisis and escapes into his male imperial victory—a future Gwendolen was not afforded in her gamble with Lydia’s crisis. Lydia managed to disrupt Gwendolen’s marriage with her unsympathetic defiance. Gwendolen, however, cannot similarly disrupt Mirah’s marriage, because Daniel’s destiny is rigged to obstruct her resistance: “While gambling and luck play important roles in both [Daniel’s and Gwendolen’s] lives, she is continually a loser and he seems continually to win” (Newton xviii). Even his failures translate into morally satisfying victories for him, demonstrating the masculine ability to lose a gamble and still win. In Cambridge, Daniel neglects his own studies while helping his friend Hans Meyrick to win a scholarship: “[Daniel] failed . . . but he had the satisfaction of seeing Meyrick win,” which was “a first-rate investment of [his] luck” (Eliot 153; ch. 16). Therefore, the eponymous hero of the novel simply cannot lose his wagers.

But while the novel’s women may not all get everything they seek, nor entirely upend traditional social values, they do succeed in opening new

possibilities, and in transforming the narrative. Notably, it is not amoral women who are punished, but amoral men. Grandcourt's depravity exposes itself through his internal thoughts. He decides that Gwendolen is "merely coquetting" when she evades his attentions, thinking that there can be no other reason behind her reservations given the privileges he can provide her (110; ch. 13). After his marriage to Gwendolen, he maintains his inability to comprehend anything beyond materialism and superficiality: "He had no idea of moral repulsion, and could not have believed, if he had been told it, that there may be a resentment and disgust which will gradually make beauty more detestable than ugliness" (565; ch. 54). Grandcourt, therefore, is beyond moral rehabilitation, as is Lapidoth, with his degenerate materialism, and Captain Davilow, with his cruel treatment of women. All three are summarily removed from the narrative. Male immorality and cruelty, therefore, is punished, in a notable departure from the Victorian literary tradition of punishing female immorality—Lydia, the fallen woman, continues living, but Grandcourt, the villainous man, dies.

Women can in fact *leverage* the failure of men to their advantage. Consider the formalist approach, offered by Levine and Ortiz-Robles, of extracting from the middle of the novel new values that transcend the traditional association of middles with mere mediocrity or indecision.¹⁶ This raises the question of what *Daniel Deronda's* bulky middle contains (recalcitrant women) and does not contain. Langland argues that "what is *not*, or only minimally, represented must be exposed in order to gain a fuller grasp of Eliot's ideological position" (188).¹⁷ Following this provocation, what is *not* (or minimally) represented in *Daniel Deronda* is a moral, young, handsome, wealthy, English bachelor. Both Rex and Hans are foolish young men in love and not of wealth. Grandcourt boasts a higher social class but is tainted by his corrupt desire for mastery. Daniel is not Sir Hugo's true heir and, being unaware of his Jewish heritage for a good part of the novel, seeks an identity. Klesmer is a Jewish musician devoid of taciturn Englishness. Jane Austen's tongue-in-cheek opening sentence in *Pride and Prejudice* reads: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" (3). In *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot playfully refers to that famous opening line: "Some readers of this history will doubtless regard it as incredible that people should construct matrimonial prospects on the mere report that a bachelor of good fortune and possibilities was coming within reach, and will reject the statement as a mere outflow of gall" (75; ch. 9). The availability of a "single man in possession of a good fortune" dwindles, in just over half a century. This can be interpreted variously—a forewarning for the "surplus-woman" problem at the fin-de-siècle,

a critique of a degenerate masculine British Empire, and so on. But, strikingly, this void in traditional male presence in the narrative is not a problem for the female characters; in fact, they use it to alter their expected destinies. Catherine Arrowpoint, for instance, does not wait for an eligible English bachelor to come along, bravely breaking tradition by marrying Klesmer and thus opening the possibility of a new outlook on marriage and a new ethnic identity for future British children.¹⁸ Therefore, the search for what *is not*—traditional bachelors—results in a firmer understanding of what *is* on the very surface—a network of women who do not form friendships or traditional marriages, instead pursuing a social resistance that has enough strength to destabilize tradition.

The women's network, then, opens new possibilities for each woman's future. Each woman in *Daniel Deronda* carves her own future possibilities with her unique ambition, expression, and talent. Some critics have argued that social structures almost entirely arrange Victorian women's fates, often making them dully similar so they can collectively recede into superfluity.¹⁹ Amy Levin argues that all female offspring in *Daniel Deronda* "are essentially the same" because "no special [female] child emerges to win a prize" (91). However, if one looks beyond Gwendolen's claim of network centrality, other women like Catherine, Lydia, Mirah, and Leonora display the potential to have their own narrative journey in novel form. Eliot's novel offers a diverse range of female defiance instead of presenting one female "winner." Even in the Meyrick sisters, there are indications of individuality—Kate's trips "to make sketches along the river" or Amy's "business errands" can potentially lead to unique narratives (Eliot 174; ch. 20).²⁰ The Meyricks represent vital nodes in the defiant women's network with their financially independent domestic setting, which Hans, the sole male Meyrick, joins intermittently only in the capacity of visitor. The Meyricks' domestic economy tenaciously obstructs male intervention—the sisters do not allow Hans to spend money "in making their lives more luxurious" (165; ch. 18). All these women's actions defy the expectations of a patriarchal society.

And women's futures are too complex to be dismissed as mere fulfillment of destiny. Traditional feminine destinies, like successful marriages and satisfying motherhoods, are not confirmed by a tight conclusion. None of the women have children, and the heroine is left as a widow to fend for herself. In its accommodations for defiant women, the narrative thwarts masculine visions of women's futures. Mr. Gascoigne, incidentally a clergyman as well as a father figure to Gwendolen, is proved wrong multiple times. His insistent advice that Gwendolen marry Grandcourt results in disaster. His subsequent envisioning of Gwendolen's widowhood is faulty as well. "[N]o doubt the arrangements

of [Grandcourt's] will lately made are satisfactory, and there may possibly be an heir yet to be born. In any case, I feel confident that Gwendolen will be liberally—I should expect, splendidly—provided for," he asserts (599; ch. 58). None of this comes true. Gwendolen is neither left much money nor pregnant with Grandcourt's heir. Her life after widowhood is something Mr. Gascoigne's traditional patriarchal outlook cannot predict. His rigid perceptions of social propriety are vigorously shaken by Grandcourt's will, which favors Lydia and her children. He painfully notes that "[f]emale morality is likely to suffer from this marked advantage and prominence being given to illegitimate offspring" (637; ch. 64). The novel's conclusion enables Lydia's son born out of wedlock to assume his role as Grandcourt's sole male heir. Lydia is effectively allowed to be mistress of the majority of Grandcourt's property, signaling the victory of her defiance. In fact, the effects of Lydia's defiance are not merely concentrated at the conclusion but insinuated in the middle of the narrative as well. The servant who gives Gwendolen the ominous diamonds and letter serves as an accomplice to Lydia despite being in Grandcourt's employ. Despite being Grandcourt's right-hand man, Lush, too, "had always been Mrs. Glasher's friend" (237; ch. 25). Lydia pervades the Grandcourt household long before it is secured for her son, exposing Grandcourt's failure in actually mastering his immediate surroundings. Therefore, where female solidarity would not have interrupted the predictable continuation of social constraints, the defiant women's network unbalances the status quo in unanticipated ways.

The effects of the women's network go beyond the mere conclusions of the women's individual narratives. In fact, the novel is famously open-ended, and this lack of resolution is itself a productive narrative form for female characters. Rather than suffering simple poetic justice for social transgression or being assigned to a traditional domestic life, the women's stories instead remain open to alternative possible futures. The answers to whether Gwendolen's widowhood will lead to future independence, or matrimony, or both; whether Mirah will successfully beget a new nation, or offspring, or both; and whether Lydia will reign as mistress of Grandcourt's property or lapse into the role of suppressed Victorian woman under a new patriarchal order forged by her son lie not at the novel's conclusion, but beyond it. Lydia's defiance, along with that of other women in the female network, reroutes the narrative trajectory planned by men, and it promotes her to the territory of new possibilities. Therefore, while the end of the novel sends its male hero on his imperial quest, it leaves open doors of untold possibility for its defiant female protagonists, signaling, if not well-defined progress, at least a release from traditional endings for women. Latour argues that "a network is not

made of . . . any durable substance but is the trace left behind by some moving agent” (132).²¹ The open-ended conclusions in the novel are engendered by the dynamic resistance of the women’s network, and clues to the untold futures lurk in the traces left behind by the acts of female defiance.²²

Women in *Daniel Deronda* operate as a network by virtue of their cumulative resistance to social norms and their cumulative power to reshape traditional narrative form. Notably, several women characters in *Daniel Deronda*, like Leonora, Mirah, and Gwendolen, aspire to be actors on stage. This in itself is an act of female defiance, because public performance is the antithesis of socially mandated domestic stability. Irrespective of their varying successes in their pursuits of stage performance, their penchant for “acting” translates to a disruptive narrative force.²³ The women’s unsympathetic struggle affords limited possibility for solidarity, but it emphasizes the effectiveness of their acts of defiance to counter masculine narratives and leave open new possibilities for themselves. In this way, *Daniel Deronda* strongly foreshadows the reorientation of Victorian gender roles that occurs in the fin-de-siècle with the New Woman movement and women’s entry into the traditional masculine workplace. This suggests the need to rethink progressive female agency in the Victorian period as resulting from “niceties” like friendship and sympathy. Eliot’s women try to achieve, with varying success, new kinds of lives by pursuing their own interests at a markedly tense remove from other women. The patriarchal society they inhabit necessitates this. Female friendship would not only participate in the reproduction of domesticity in the separate “feminine” sphere that these women are trying to overcome, but also elevate the needs of others over their own, reducing their ability to advocate for their own advancement. Instead, the women in the novel form a robust, disruptive, effective network of action while at the same time remaining largely unsympathetic or even antagonistic toward one another.

Conclusion

The women’s network in *Daniel Deronda*, with its unsympathetic agency, pushes against the ideology that women occupy a secondary position in society. Eliot’s contemporary John Ruskin described gender roles this way:

[T]he woman’s power is for rule, not for battle,—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. . . . The man, in his rough work in open world, must encounter all peril and trial:—to him, therefore, the failure, the offence, the inevitable error: often he must be wounded, or subdued, often misled and [always]

hardened. But he guards the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled by her, *unless she herself has sought it*, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offence. This is the true nature of home—it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. (117–18; emphasis added)

Daniel Deronda seems to revise this account. Men repeatedly fail to protect women as Ruskin promises that they will. And Eliot, seeming to pick up on his notions about women seeking trouble, writes female characters who seek what might seem to Ruskin like temptation or error, but are in fact reprieves from patriarchal authority. Some women, like the independent Meyricks and bold and assertive Catherine, are even able to arrive at peaceful conclusions without male support. Eliot's novel amends Ruskin's mandates on gender with passionate and independent women, foreshadowing the fin-de-siècle, when women would be more included in the "open world" and their domestic economy would expand to a national one.

The novel likewise foreshadows altered gender norms. The Meyrick sisters display female vocational independence, and Leonora mentions her man's genius trapped in a woman's social constraints (531; ch. 51). Even peripheral characters like Anna betray clandestine maleness. Anna is called "a tomboy" who does not like feminine activities and would rather "go blackberrying" (25; ch. 3). Likewise, during his meeting with Leonora, Daniel changes color "like a girl," and she feminizes him by calling him "a beautiful creature" (525–26; ch. 51). The ring Leonora gives him symbolically represents Daniel's rightful paternal legacy. Yet, by reducing paternal legacy to an ornamental placeholder, the novel upsets paternal authority over Daniel's identity, which only Daniel's mother can legitimize. This goes to show how the women's network in the novel loosens rigid mid-Victorian gender conventions, enabling women to adopt the traditionally male role of transmission. Daniel, like the protagonists of the female bildungsroman, must learn to assert himself (G. Levine, *Dying* 184). And the themes explored in *Daniel Deronda* return in notable fin-de-siècle narratives, indicating the novel's relevance to future concerns about gender roles.²⁴

Despite some ambivalence of gender roles in *Daniel Deronda*, however, male superiority still reigns. Daniel overcomes the feminine constraints of his narrative to embody imperial masculine exceptionalism in the end. But the product of this ambivalence matters less than *the ambivalence itself*. "[T]he characters' conception of moral ideals often reveals the importance of dialectical speculation," and this is not "a strictly Hegelian progression that

transcends opposites through synthesis . . . [but] a broader sense of thinking and imagining that integrates differences to achieve new perspectives or understandings” (Li 774). The events of the novel do leave the patriarchal cast of its society intact, but the network of recalcitrant women who refuse traditional female sympathy in favor of agency, the narrative energy produced by these women, and the novel’s open-ended conclusion all lead to new ideas about gender, which retrospectively represents the “fruit and seed” borne by the novel. Reading the defiant network of women in *Daniel Deronda* provides a renewed understanding of the novel’s narrative dynamics, and it also reveals the novel’s role in envisioning a potential future collective of women with redefined positions in domesticity and beyond. Women in the network are connected by their pursuit of independence, but they are held apart by their distinct needs and the futility of mutual sympathy. This antagonistic linkage evokes the “separateness with communication” pledged by Daniel’s male imperial narrative (Eliot 609; ch. 60). The women’s network claims that political form for a domestic feminism and foreshadows a near-future inclusion of women in the British imperial landscape.

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NOTES

1. Several critics have noted that Gwendolen’s fear of domesticity (i.e., “a woman’s life”) stems from an unstated but firm refusal to sink to the level of the working class. See Langland 208; Levin 79, 89; Paris 134.

2. For more on the relationship between female friendship and the Victorian marriage plot, see Marcus, chapter 2.

3. Slauch-Sanford also points out that Lydia, far from being a subordinate character, foreshadows the fin-de-siècle anxiety of racial degeneration (403–04).

4. Newton argues that *Daniel Deronda* depends on previous eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels, and that it grapples with Darwinian probability rather than fact (xxiii–xxiv).

5. See Civello, especially paragraph 28; Weisser 5.

6. See Wilt, especially 316.

7. In “The Spoiled Child,” Reimer argues that Gwendolen is a victim of sexual abuse by her stepfather.

8. Marcus is referring to Sarah Ellis. See Ellis 75.

9. See Levin 78–79, 89.

10. Eliot was responding to contemporary readers' attempts at detaching the Jewish and Christian narratives in *Daniel Deronda* and focusing extensively on Gwendolen. The trend of privileging Gwendolen's plot continued well into the twentieth century, with F. R. Leavis famously suggesting that republication as *Gwendolen Harleth* would do justice to the novel (122).

11. Also see Latour 154. For further explanation of "actor" and "agency" in ANT, see Felski 748.

12. Networks do not exist by themselves and often interact with one another, resulting in multiple networks overlapping (C. Levine 120). For more on how forms, and in turn networks, collide with one another, see C. Levine, especially chapter 5.

13. Hollander also points out that the limitation of Daniel's sympathy is revealed in his reaction to Leonora (79).

14. It is tempting to categorize female transmissive ability under racial othering because both Daniel and Mirah have Jewish mothers, but several critics have shown that all women irrespective of race face similar social challenges. See Beer 182; Carroll 230; Dekel 81–82; Doyle 337; Golightly 55.

15. In *Imperial Leather*, McClintock argues that the English domestic ideal defined gender roles as well as the overall British imperial identity. See 5, 16–17, 34–35, 132–80, 208–09.

16. See Levine and Ortiz-Robles 3–7 for more about the critical tendency to associate narrative middles with mediocrity.

17. Langland employs symptomatic reading to analyze Eliot. For details on the interpretive method, see Jameson, especially chapter 1. For the contrasting methods of surface reading and just reading applied to the Victorian marriage plot, see Marcus, especially chapter 2.

18. However, several critics have noted Eliot's uncertainty about the mixing of races. See E. Auerbach; Kearney 292; Kuehn 27–28; Slauch-Sanford 414.

19. See Levin 91; Szirotny 177.

20. Narratives of women like the Meyrick sisters more commonly become central plots in novels of the fin-de-siècle. Kate Meyrick's work along the river brings to mind Gissing's *The Odd Women*, where Monica Madden's walks by the riverside lead to her meeting Widdowson.

21. Also see Felski 750; C. Levine 129–30.

22. For more on the dynamic quality of the women's narratives in *Daniel Deronda*, see Beer 194; Gates 705; Hollander 71.

23. For more on women's artistic ambitions and female theater/acting in *Daniel Deronda*, see Booth; Voskuil.

24. For example, Hadria in Mona Caird's *The Daughters of Danaus* faces unwanted motherhood and temporarily abandons her children to pursue art like Leonora, and Monica in George Gissing's *The Odd Women* wrongly relies on marriage to fulfill her aspirations like Gwendolen.

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