

**PERIPHERAL SYMPATHIES**

PERIPHERAL SYMPATHIES: GENDER, ETHICS, AND MARGINAL  
CHARACTERS IN THE NOVELS OF GEORGE ELIOT

By ROBIN SOPHER, B.A., M.A.

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AUTHOR: Robin Sopher, M.A. (McMaster University)

SUPERVISOR: Dr. Grace Kehler

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the connections between sympathy, gender, and characterization in four novels by George Eliot. It contributes to studies of George Eliot's work by offering readings of minor characters in *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Middlemarch*, and *Daniel Deronda*. Focusing on these characters, who have tended to be ignored in critical studies of the novels, this dissertation argues for a re-evaluation of the relationship between gender and sympathy as understood by George Eliot. Taking into consideration a number of characters who exhibit a range of gendered behaviours and identities, this study explores how both normative and non-normative expressions of masculinity and femininity inform individuals' sympathy. It uses the concepts of sympathetic economies and sympathetic ethics to demarcate the tension between realism and idealism in George Eliot's representations of sympathy. The goal of this dissertation is to begin to map out some of the ways in which careful attention to peripheral characters can enhance readings of sympathetic ethics and economies in George Eliot by showing the subtle and challenging ways in which sympathy inflects, and is in turn inflected by, discourses about femininity and masculinity.

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## DECLARATION OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

This dissertation contributes to the field of English literature by taking a new approach to the study of four major novels by George Eliot. It is the first extensive study focusing exclusively on minor characters in her fiction. This work engages with ongoing debates about gender, ethics, and affect in Victorian studies, and introduces the concepts of sympathetic ethics and sympathetic economies as a way of understanding the tensions inherent in George Eliot's representation of sympathy.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

This dissertation explores the intersecting concerns of sympathy, gender, and peripheral characters in four novels by George Eliot (1819-1880): *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Middlemarch* (1871-2), and *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Sympathy's spirit of connection and inclusiveness—and the way it problematizes these things—informs this project, which explores the interplay of sympathy and gender in some of George Eliot's peripheral characters. The connections sympathy promotes include both relationships between individuals and communal cohesion, two kinds of connections that, in George Eliot's ethical universe, exist in a reciprocal and mutually re-inforcing dynamic. Sympathetic connections affirm the importance of affective bonds over normative ones, and therefore fuse the ethical with the emotional. The sympathy in which I am interested is, primarily, that modeled by the characters themselves. I show how peripheral characters dramatize the productive effects of sympathetic ethics, and how their sympathy interacts with their performances of gender. Engaging with both the recent resurgence of interest in sympathy in Victorian literature and culture, as well as with established critical analyses of Victorian gender norms and performances, I show how George Eliot uses peripheral characters to complicate her vision of sympathetic ethics, and how their characterization complicates the ways in which gender and sympathy inform each other.

Sympathy remains a pressing issue in Victorianist criticism in general, and George Eliot criticism in particular,<sup>1</sup> although the ways in which critics address sympathy are by no means uniform or, at times, even compatible. Some, like Suzanne Graver, see Eliotian sympathy as essentially positive, and discuss it as an ethical ideal. Others, like Audrey Jaffe and Neil Hertz, focus on its limitations, and read sympathy in the context of an economy of scarcity and inequality.<sup>2</sup> The breadth of issues sympathy covers may in part explain this. These include the ways in which sympathy can both undermine and bolster normative gender ideology, as well as sympathy's status as both an affect and a potential force or

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<sup>1</sup> That George Eliot is a—perhaps the—key figure for understanding Victorian sympathy is not a new idea. For example, Suzanne Graver, in *George Eliot and Community* (1984), argues that George Eliot, “not only participated in but also helped to create” the “Victorian aesthetic of sympathy,” which was “based on a belief in the power of art to enlarge the reader’s capacities for sympathetic response” (11). Graver argues that George Eliot also “sought to effect so comprehensive a change of sensibility as ultimately to change society” (11). While many critics discuss sympathy in George Eliot, still others emphasize its importance in her work even though they do not always label it as such. Neil Hertz (2003), for example, argues that George Eliot’s works “are explicitly about the imaging of others—about the status of the image of one person in the imagining mind of another” (27). Other George Eliot critics who take up the topic of sympathy include Rachel Ablow (2007), Amanda Anderson (2001), Ellen Argyros (1999), Mary Ellen Doyle (1981), Elizabeth Deeds Ermath (1985), Audrey Jaffe (2000), Anna Kornbluh (2010), Brigid Lowe (2007), and Mary Ann O’Farrell (2004).

<sup>2</sup> In *George Eliot’s Pulse* (2003), Hertz suggests that, at certain moments, “it may seem like the best advice to give someone on the receiving end of George Eliot’s narrator’s sympathy would be: ‘Duck!’” (96). Yet, at the same time, he allows that George Eliot’s narrator expresses “no lightly assumed or casually dispensed sympathy, but rather a pity as attentive and informed as it is generous” (96). This is troubled, though, he suggests, by “the often harsh destinies assigned these characters [those on the receiving end of the narrator’s sympathy], not by the compassionate narrator, but by whomever one holds responsible for the plotting of the novels” (96).

impetus to action, and the ways in which it informs understandings of public and private. Exploring sympathy means exploring the always fraught and complex intersections—and divergences—of ethics and of emotions, and of social relationships and constructions, especially those based upon class, race, and gender. As Amanda Anderson (2001) has noted, such constructions became for George Eliot, as for other members of her culture, sites she used “to manage her own ambivalence by mapping distinctions onto [them]” (14). Sympathy, then, can be seen as a nexus that reveals the interconnections not only of different Victorian discourses, but, also, of recent theoretical and critical approaches. As I use the term, sympathy is both an affect and a force, but, in both cases, it provides a way of understanding ethical relationships between people. This is similar to Rachel Ablow’s (2007) description of sympathy as “a mode of relating to others and of defining the self” (2). Thus, sympathy remains as problematic for us today as it was for the Victorians. It serves as both a fertile ground for various sorts of explorations into Victorian literature and culture and a site of inquiry in which the critical endeavour itself becomes the subject of (self-)scrutiny. For these reasons, I suggest, sympathy remains a topic of intense fascination and debate for Victorianist scholars.

Recent criticism on sympathy in the novels of George Eliot has explored the relationship between gender, particularly femininity, and sympathy, and this project owes much to that discussion. Ablow (2007), for example, interrogates “the common Victorian claim that novel reading constitutes a way to achieve the

psychic, ethical, and affective benefits associated with sympathy in married life” (1), and traces the critical literature on the relationship between the ideology of separate spheres and the feminized Victorian notion of sympathy. Ablow’s work informs this dissertation in many ways, and I refer frequently to it throughout this dissertation. My work builds on hers, extending her reading of sympathy and gender to peripheral characters. The primary contribution of this dissertation, then, is not a revision of previous work on gender and sympathy but, rather, a dissemination of these ideas to include peripheral characters.

I take George Eliot’s idealistic vision of communities based on sympathy seriously, thereby aligning myself with critics including Suzanne Graver, who focus on the potential of such idealism, without ignoring its challenges and limitations.<sup>3</sup> George Eliot’s ethics of sympathy is idealistic, insofar as it depends upon the assumption that people are fundamentally good. It comes into an uneasy relationship with an affective economy based on scarcity. The contrast between sympathetic ethics and sympathetic economies marks one of the key challenges in reading George Eliot’s novels. Precisely because sympathy in her work, as well as in Victorian culture more generally, is so ambivalent, it remains a pressing issue for critics. Sympathy can be, as Jaffe ultimately sees it, something with a

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<sup>3</sup> Graver (1984) discusses the tensions between George Eliot’s sympathetic ideal and the social realities she describes. She argues that these tensions persist throughout George Eliot’s novels and are key to understanding her ethical and aesthetic project: “[t]hroughout her career George Eliot struggled to bring into the aesthetic of sympathy both the assent required by community of feeling and the critical assessment and constructive dissent no less necessary to social regeneration” (13).

self-protecting or self-aggrandizing trajectory. At the same time, as George Eliot attempted to show, it can also mark an attempt to go beyond the self. Sympathy involves responding to the other with feelings that desire above all else the well-being of that other. Jaffe's view fits into the idea of an economy of sympathy, while the idea that sympathy can signal the desire to extend the self forms the basis of sympathetic ethics. Sympathy in George Eliot's novels shows the imbrication of the ethical with the economic.

Studies of George Eliot's minor characters are rare. This lack stands out not only because of the breadth and richness of criticism on George Eliot, but, also, due to her own insistent focus on the crucial impact of communities on individuals and vice versa. Other critics have noted the seemingly contradictory aspects of George Eliot's efforts at sympathetic inclusiveness: Mary Ann O'Farrell (2004), for example, argues that, "[i]f Eliot's social and communal encyclopedism would seem to invite everyone, it nevertheless keeps everyone at bay" (146). In other words, George Eliot's sympathy involves a certain degree of detachment that seems to undermine that very sympathy. In speaking of peripheral characters in George Eliot, I refer to characters who occupy relatively little narrative space, and whose development, or even lack thereof, is not focused on within the novels. Such characters tend to be auxiliary to the novel's protagonists, as, for example, Seth Bede is to Adam in *Adam Bede*, or Celia Brooke is to Dorothea in *Middlemarch*. While they are often excluded or marginalized in terms of the novels' economies of sympathy, they nonetheless

contribute significantly to the ethics of sympathy that the novels set up as an ideal, in that they may receive little sympathy from the narrative as a whole but, at the same time, contribute to George Eliot's articulation and demonstration of sympathetic ethics,<sup>4</sup> including how economic models of sympathy trouble such ethics. For this reason, George Eliot's peripheral characters provide a fertile ground from which to explore her ambivalent yet ultimately hopeful vision of sympathy.

The uneven distribution of sympathy in the Victorian novel suggests a number of issues. These include ethical questions about the failures and potential of liberal humanism, the human capacity for sympathetic identification, and what it means to premise ethics on affect. The particular means by which I come to these questions has to do with the marginalization of certain characters in four of George Eliot's novels. Focusing on minor characters allows one to look at sympathy in new ways, as most George Eliot criticism has focused on her central characters (indeed, this remains the case with literary criticism more generally).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> As Barbara Hardy (1959) points out, “[t]he compassion never dies out of George Eliot's commentary. [. . .] there are very few characters who do not move in the medium of their author's considerate sympathy” (163).

<sup>5</sup> One important exception is Neil Hertz. In *George Eliot's Pulse* (2003), Hertz focuses his analysis of George Eliot's novels on minor characters: Mr. Casaubon in *Middlemarch*, Hetty in *Adam Bede*, and Alcharisi and Lapidoth in *Daniel Deronda*. These characters, he points out, are “stigmatized within the moral economy of the novels and [. . .] cast out of their depicted societies” (2). He argues that such characters “function as skewed, heavily or lightly disguised surrogates of their author, and their fates thus act to be read allegorically, as clues to Eliot's understanding of—or apprehensions about—that form of agency called authorship” (2).

This dissertation seeks to understand how and why certain characters, many of whom embody a sympathetic ideal, are marginalized within the economy of sympathy, not only in their treatment by other characters but, more significantly, by both the narrator and by the novel as a whole.<sup>6</sup> Through the close examination of minor characters and their treatment at various narrative levels, I explore the varieties of sympathy in the novels of George Eliot, and how sympathy posits emotion as an important component of ethical decision-making.

## I. The Sympathetic Ideal and Its Economies

The confrontation between the ideal, which is an ethics of sympathy, and the real, which problematizes such an ethics by putting it in an economic context, makes up part of the difficulty of reading sympathy in the novels of George Eliot. Her ideal seems to be a society structured on sympathy, in which affectively charged ethics determine relationships between individuals, and allow for communal life. Still, George Eliot recognizes the challenges and sacrifices such

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Another notable exception is Barbara Hardy, who, in passing, touches on the moral significance of Eliot's minor characters in her book *The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form* (1959). She argues that George Eliot, in contrast to Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, "does not usually make the exaggerated feature of the 'character' the moral trait," but, rather, has minor characters that make "their contribution to the moral theme" (79).

<sup>6</sup> I agree with Elizabeth Deeds Ermath (1983), who argues that "George Eliot exploits the narrator's powers deliberately and fully" (222) and that her narrators works as "coordinating viewpoint[s]" (66), and it is for this reason that I emphasize the narrator's perspective as closer to the author's than that of any other single character.

an ethic demands. The need to diminish egotism emerges as first and foremost among these. This does not mean that sympathy always demands an evacuation of the self but, rather, that it constructs a self anchored in relationships both to individual others and to the wider community. The self, then, to which I refer throughout this dissertation, is a communitarian self: as Charles Taylor (1989) argues, “[o]ne is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it” (35). As characters ranging from Seth Bede to Camden Farebrother demonstrate, the sympathetic individual does not—indeed, cannot—achieve happiness or even self-actualization merely through the fulfillment of individual desires, when these desires prompt the subject to ignore his or her bonds to the community. George Eliot’s ethics of sympathy makes demands on both individuals and communities, in that it urges a re-thinking of both self and society.<sup>7</sup>

Criticism on sympathy in George Eliot’s novels is extensive and rich, and this dissertation draws on the work of a number of critics. I introduce the concepts of sympathetic ethics and sympathetic economies in part as a way of organizing this criticism. My unique contribution to the field of George Eliot studies is not so much a re-thinking of how sympathy works in her novels, as it is

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<sup>7</sup> Sympathy, in other words, is not, for George Eliot, only or even primarily a private virtue. Rather, as Graver (1984) argues, George Eliot emphasizes the necessity “of a gradual social transformation that would begin with a revolution in individual sensibilities” (10). Further, according to George Eliot’s “aesthetic credo,” “[t]he changes in human perception and feeling that begin in the individual relate to the general concept of development by preparing the way for widespread social change” (35).

an examination of the ways in which peripheral characters illustrate her ideas about sympathy, ideas that have been well documented by other scholars, and I cite many of these ideas throughout this dissertation. Thus, discussions of sympathy in this introduction are primarily an overview of existing criticism on George Eliot and affect, whereas my particular contribution is the focus on the peripheral as a significant site of George Eliot's working out of the importance of diversity and particularity to both ethics and aesthetics. Focusing on peripheral characters, I emphasize the troubled relationship between non-normative masculinities and sympathy, as well as between conventional femininity and sympathy.

While, as I have said, George Eliot espoused an ethics based on sympathy, her novels also grapple with the tacit but problematic idea of economies of sympathy.<sup>8</sup> By "economy of sympathy," I mean the idea that sympathy might be finite and must, therefore, be rationed, often being meted out unequally. Ethics of sympathy might be understood as an ideal, while economies of sympathy might be seen as the problematic structures that arise in attempts to put this ideal into practice. Audrey Jaffe (2000) has theorized the economic features of sympathy, arguing that Victorian fiction repeatedly figures sympathy as "the metaphorical currency by means of which identity is constituted and undone" (16), and that,

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<sup>8</sup> George Eliot was not the only Victorian to see sympathy as the right basis for ethical life. Andrew H. Miller (2008) has argued that John Stuart Mill, for example, saw moral perfectionism as necessarily propelled by "sustaining sympathy" (8). Similarly, Amanda Anderson (2001) argues that, "[a]n impartiality tinged with sympathy is for Mill not only an ethical but also an intellectual ideal" (16).

“[s]ympathy and charity situate the self in a hydraulic relationship with other selves, in which a flow of funds in one direction represents a drain unless balanced by some—usually moral—return” (16). Whereas Jaffe explores the relationship between Victorian sympathy and the capitalist economy,<sup>9</sup> I am using the terms economy and economics here in a more metaphoric sense (although the metaphor works only because of the diffusive influence of capitalism on Victorian life and thought). This aligns me with Hertz (2003), who discusses narrative and moral economies in George Eliot.<sup>10</sup> Yet, like Jaffe, I discuss the ways in which sympathy is treated like a scarce commodity in the context of novel-reading and writing. In other words, I am interested in the way in which the narrative’s sympathy for one character emerges in ways that imply a loss of sympathy for another. I agree to some extent with Kornbluh (2010), who argues that, “[i]nvested with economic importance and investigated with economic language, Eliotian sympathy itself starts to appear as an economy. Sympathy figures as an economy of attention and affection—a distribution of psychological resources—subject to laws or scarcity, and clamoring for regulation” (243). I argue, however,

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<sup>9</sup> Jaffe’s example of charity makes this explicit, as it involves an actual translation of sympathy into money. She also discusses less obvious aspects of sympathy’s relationship to capitalism, however, by arguing that the sympathetic exchange reveals middle-class fears of the fungibility of class positions: “[t]he threat encoded in the sympathetic exchange is that on which a capitalist economy relies: the possibility that the spectator ‘at ease’ and the beggar might indeed, someday, change places” (7).

<sup>10</sup> Hertz speaks, for example, of “the economy of the novel’s [*Daniel Deronda*’s] double plot” (130), the “sophisticated economies, commercial or moral or textual” (64) in *The Mill on the Floss*, and “the moral and psychological economies” that power George Eliot’s novels.

that while George Eliot maps the ways in which sympathy can assume the features of an economy, she remains critical of this tendency, and promotes sympathetic ethics as a countering force to the economic view of sympathy and society, a view that emphasizes scarcity and necessity. While Victorian capitalism certainly informs this way of thinking about sympathy, my primary interest here is not so much on that connection as it is on the implications of such economic thinking for reading the novels of George Eliot. Economic understandings of sympathy, I argue, threaten to undermine sympathetic ethics by narrowing and distorting their scope, and peripheral characters in George Eliot draw attention to this danger.

The characters on the periphery of the main narrative arc are also often peripheral in terms of the economy of sympathy and attention. As Kornbluh (2010) argues, “[t]he problem of sympathy’s limited supply and inequitable apportionment” (942) surfaces throughout George Eliot’s novels.<sup>11</sup> Peripheral characters draw attention to the ethical problems inherent in thinking of sympathy as an economy. This does not mean that they are excluded from George Eliot’s ethics of sympathy, however. In fact, as I discuss in the chapters that follow, such peripheral characters often significantly advance the novels’ explorations of what it might mean to both live and write sympathetically, and of the difficulties and dangers in doing so. Peripheral characters thus often highlight the tension

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<sup>11</sup> To illustrate this, Kornbluh gestures to *Adam Bede*’s “depictions of ‘more or less ugly, stupid, inconsistent people’” and *Daniel Deronda*’s “program for consolidating a ‘too diffuse sympathy’” (242).

between sympathetic ethics and sympathetic economies, while also suggesting the productive potential of such a tension. Such characters, in other words, seem peripheral when one reads sympathy in the context of economic thinking, but emerge as central in terms of George Eliot's meditations on the possibilities of sympathetic ethics that have the potential to transcend economic understandings of relationships between people and of the construction of communities.

## II. George Eliot's Sympathy: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Gender

In this section, I explore the claims for sympathy made by George Eliot. Her belief in the importance of sympathy infuses all of her novels. That promoting and modeling sympathy was the intended aim of George Eliot's novels is clear, not only because of the prominence of sympathy as a concern in the novels themselves but, also, because she frequently expressed this in her letters and essays. In a much-cited passage from "The Natural History of German Life" (1856), for example, she argues that,

[t]he greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the expansion of our sympathies. Appeals founded on generalization and statistics require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment. (263)

Many critics have taken this statement as evidence for George Eliot's faith in the relationship between realism and sympathy, with Karen Chase (1984) using it to

support her claim that “Eliot’s most fundamental justification for art [is] its capacity to stir human sympathy” (144), and Amanda Anderson (2001) suggesting that, for George Eliot, “only forms of representation that duplicate [. . .] close observation activate the sympathies of the reader” (11).<sup>12</sup> Rachel Ablow (2007), who also cites this passage, has questioned such claims, however, arguing that such a “conception of Eliot’s ethics and aesthetics consistently breaks down [. . .] when confronted with those moments in her novels in which understanding has no obvious relationship to the alleviation of pain” (70). Here, Ablow focuses on the breakdown of sympathy, while Chase concentrates on the ability of the novel to create sympathy in the reader. Between these two levels lies the sympathy within the novels themselves: the sympathy of characters and of the narrator. Concentrating on this sympathy shows the way in which the novels work out and model both sympathetic ideals and the problems such idealism must confront. I would suggest that the failures of sympathy Ablow finds in George Eliot do not necessarily signal an inconsistency in her aesthetic and ethical philosophy but, rather, demonstrate the difficulties of putting such a philosophy into practice. These difficulties become particularly evident, as I will show in the following chapters, in the peripheral characters who model different ways of relating sympathetically to the world.

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<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Steven Marcus (1975) asserts that, for George Eliot, “[s]ympathy [. . .] is *the enabling* social sentiment” (1975). Zelda Austen (1976), too, claims that, to George Eliot, “the sympathetic imagination is the foundation of all morality, and we can never be good until we lose ourselves and feel with others” (560).

George Eliot's understanding of sympathy both arose out of and contributed to Victorian thinking on sympathy. Jaffe (2000), reading through the lens of Adam Smith's definition of sympathy, sees Victorian sympathy as primarily about the subject imagining him or herself occupying the place of the other.<sup>13</sup> This formulation of sympathy emphasizes the role of class anxiety, suggesting that the sympathetic spectator is caught up in a "(dread) fantasy of occupying another's social place" (Jaffe 8). Ablow (2007), in contrast to Jaffe, focuses more on how the subject imagines the affects of the other, defining sympathy "as the experience of entering imaginatively into another's thoughts or feelings" (8). She, too, however, explores the ways in which Victorian anxieties surrounding social class, gender, and the separation of spheres inflected contemporary thinking about sympathy.<sup>14</sup> For the Victorians, then, sympathy meant an attempt to relate ethically to other people that combined affective experience with social and cultural discourses and power structures. Victorian sympathy, then, can best be understood not as pity, but as something much larger: as a way of relating to other people that takes into account the force of culture to

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<sup>13</sup> Adam Smith (1790) formulated sympathy as a scenario in which the subject imagines him or herself in the place of the other (rather than imagining the other's affects directly). He (and Jaffe) emphasize the sympathizer's perception of the situation, rather than the affects of the one with whom he or she sympathizes.

<sup>14</sup> Ablow argues, for example, that "[m]arital sympathy [. . .] came to function both as a pleasure characteristic of the domestic sphere—a reward for the man's hard labor in the marketplace—and as what enables him to persist in those labors without being entirely corrupted" (4). Her central argument is that the novel came to be increasingly associated with a similar kind of sympathy to that of the idealized wife.

determine social relations, while at the same time allowing for the subversive potential of affect.

Affect is potentially subversive because it defies anticipation, making it difficult to manage. For George Eliot's characters, it often acts on the self in ways that are not always predictable or desirable, and therefore requires a certain surrender of self that entails the re-thinking of assumptions. This is key to George Eliot's ethical ideal, in which the openness to flexibility, to being wrought on by feelings, whether one's own or those of the other, counterpoises the ideologies and structures that seek to control without regard for individual variation. Mary Ann O'Farrell (2004) argues that George Eliot promotes "a certain ethical responsiveness" that "depends upon a readiness to be distracted by the felt needs of another person" (151).<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Andrew H. Miller (2008) suggests that, while "we often imagine ourselves improving through following rules, commandments, laws, guidelines," another vision of moral self-improvement involves "openness to example—through responsive, unpredictable engagements with other people" (3). Affect, then, brings to George Eliot's ethics an element of uncertainty, in which the potential to be distracted by the feelings of the other, and one's own responsive feelings, overrides other concerns, including the demands

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<sup>15</sup> O'Farrell emphasizes the affective component of George Eliot's sympathy, or compassion, arguing that, for her, "compassion can move with the overtaking force of a passion" (151), and that "[t]he admissions that facilitate compassion may be as much the product of argument as of feeling" (151).

of society and culture.<sup>16</sup> Part of sympathy's ethical force, then, depends upon its reliance on affect, and on the uncertainty that that entails.

Sympathy was integral to George Eliot's writing; her particular vision of sympathy cannot be understood apart from her aesthetic project.<sup>17</sup> Sympathy justified her own vocation as a novelist or, as George Levine (2008) puts it, her "[l]iterature takes out a social contract" (10). As she wrote to Charles Bray in 1859, "the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to imagine and to feel the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves" (qtd. in Keen 54). Here, what stands out is the emphasis both on imagining and feeling, which George Eliot's syntax suggests are not only linked but of equivalent value. There is also here a recognition of difference ("those who differ from themselves") and a sense that the need to foster sympathy takes on a particular urgency in the context of such difference. For George Eliot, then, the production of sympathy was not only a measure of both aesthetic and moral success, but also an activity that involved both author and reader in the work of feeling and imagining in the context of difference.

Peripheral characters come into this project of fostering sympathy through the difficult work of addressing variation between individuals.

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<sup>16</sup> This is not to imply that affect is utterly separate from culture or ideology; it is not. Jaffe (2000), for example, has described feeling as a powerful "conduit for ideological meaning" (14). Yet, I suggest that while feeling (or affect) might be entwined with culture and ideologies, it is not contained by them, and, as such, can work from the inside to dismantle, or, at least, unsettle, them.

<sup>17</sup> Anna Kornbluh (2010) points out that George Eliot "venerated sympathy as the *raison d'être* of her aesthetic, and in turn, as our scholarly accounts regularly recognize, she defined sympathy itself as aesthetic" (942).

George Eliot's articulation of her philosophy of sympathy is not limited to her letters and essays, however. Her novels also develop and expand it. They also show a progression in her thinking of sympathy. In "George Eliot's Conception of Sympathy" (1985), Elizabeth Deeds Ermath argues that, "[t]hough sympathy is a crucial concern to George Eliot throughout her career, it has a special meaning in the fiction of her mid-career" (27). Here I disagree with Ermath, in that I suggest it is not so much the value of sympathy that changes over the course of George Eliot's career but, rather, the avenues in which she deploys it. As Ermath rightly notes, the early novels "treat sympathy mainly in terms of the relations between well-acquainted individuals" (27). However, it seems to me that there is still some recognition, however tacit, that sympathy might be more expansive (as it is in *Daniel Deronda*, in which it becomes a force for change within the Jewish community and beyond). In *Adam Bede*, for example, the narrator urges sympathy for ordinary, imperfect people:

[t]hese fellow-mortals, every one, must be accepted as they are: you can neither straighten their noses, nor brighten their wit, nor rectify their dispositions; and it is these people—amongst whom your life is passed—that it is needful you should tolerate, pity, and love: it is these more or less ugly, stupid, inconsistent people, whose movements of goodness you should be able to admire—for whom you should cherish all possible hopes, all possible patience. (239)

Of this passage, D. S. Dalal (2007) says, "here is a tacit recognition of the fact that every private life is determined by a wider public life" (96). To this, I would add that this passage emphasizes that the wider public consists of people who, in their imperfections, are both distinct and deserving of sympathy. George Eliot's

use, in this passage, of the words “admire” and “cherish” also shows how different her vision of sympathy is from the narrow, condescending view of sympathy as mere pity. In a positive sense, pity might entail a concern for the well-being of the other. Yet, to admire and cherish the other requires the subject to see him or her as an equal. George Eliot’s sympathy, then, posits a community of equals, rather than a one-way relationship that consolidates the subject’s identity at the expense of the other’s dignity. In *Adam Bede*, for example, George Eliot situates sympathy in the context of community, but also makes clear that communities are always made of individuals.

### III. Gender and Sympathy in George Eliot

Gender in George Eliot’s novels has long been a source of difficulty for critics, often because of the seeming disconnect between George Eliot’s own unconventional life—her common-law marriage with George Henry Lewes and success as a novelist—and the conventional fates of her heroines.<sup>18</sup> Part of this frustration relates to the ways in which George Eliot seems to align sympathy with femininity. Kathleen Blake (2001) makes this explicit, arguing that “women continue to read and rebel against Eliot fiction,” and that “[a]t the heart of the

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<sup>18</sup> See Zelda Austen’s “Why Feminists are Angry with George Eliot” (1976). Austen explains, that, applied to *Middlemarch*, feminist anger with George Eliot has to do with the conviction that she [George Eliot] “should have seen that while she was imitating reality in depicting the misery of the unconventional heroine and the placidity of the conventional wives and mothers, she was also sanctioning the norm and making it normative” (1976).

problem [that feminists have with her novels] is George Eliot's emphasis on woman's sympathy, a condition that seems to demand not only self-sacrifice but sacrifice of life itself" (216). I agree with Blake that problems surrounding gender in George Eliot's fiction are also problems of sympathy, but I would challenge the suggestion that either sympathy or gender is represented in a straightforward or monolithic way in the novels.<sup>19</sup> Rather, I argue, George Eliot explores the ways in which gender and sympathy can inflect each other in ways that are sometimes highly problematic while, at others, ethically productive. Furthermore, I show that sympathy is one of the means by which George Eliot unhinges gender from sex, while at the same time making concessions to Victorian gender ideology.<sup>20</sup>

George Eliot's treatment of gender shows both her immersion in, and rebellion against, Victorian gender normativity. For George Eliot, as for

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<sup>19</sup> In this I agree with Graver (1984), who challenges Showalter's (1980) criticism of George Eliot's seeming anti-feminism, arguing, instead, that there was an "intimate, albeit embattled, connection between George Eliot's social and aesthetic concerns and the nineteenth-century debate on the woman question" (183).

<sup>20</sup> This builds on work done by Graver (1984), who explores the ways in which George Eliot, in her novels, struggled to challenge her readers' assumptions without alienating them. Graver argues:

George Eliot fully realized the difficulty of changing, yet not alienating, the reader. In her fiction her effort to enlarge the reader's sensibility often includes a criticism of conventional ways of thinking, acting, and responding. If the criticism is so sharp as to constitute an assault upon the reader, however, it threatens the very sense of community the author seeks to create. Yet, to omit such criticism might also lead to failure, leaving the reader to rest comfortably instead of being aroused to transforming discovery. (16)

Victorian culture more generally, gender existed in a matrix involving other determinants of identity. Elizabeth Langland (1995) has argued that George Eliot privileged gender over class constructions: “[a]lthough Eliot empowers women through moral and spiritualizing language, she simultaneously disempowers them as bourgeois managers” (23). I explore similar claims about the relationship between gender and class in George Eliot. In my chapter on *Middlemarch*, for example, I focus on the differences in the sympathy of Rosamond Vincy and Celia Brooke. I argue that Celia’s performance of femininity includes sympathy as a vital component, whereas Rosamond’s understanding and enactment of femininity does not, and that this is at least in part because of the difference in their social positions.<sup>21</sup> The ways in which these multiple discourses—gender occupying a privileged place amongst them—come into play in George Eliot’s fiction are also, I suggest, determined by George Eliot’s philosophy of sympathy.

George Eliot’s nuanced exploration of how gender and sympathy work must be understood in the context of Victorian gender ideology, which is best understood through the doctrine of separate spheres. In *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987), Nancy Armstrong explores the ways in which domesticity became linked with bourgeois femininity, and how the nineteenth-century novel was instrumental in this. She argues that the middle-

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<sup>21</sup> Reina Lewis (1996) points out that, in George Eliot’s society, “notions of identity were formulated across structural divisions of not just class and gender, but also race and nation” (71), and this is particularly clear in *Daniel Deronda*. She focuses on the character of Alcharisi to show how gender orthodoxy affects an individual’s ability and inclination to behave sympathetically, and this is a claim I explore in more detail in the chapters that follow.

class woman's desirability "hinged upon an education in frugal domestic practices," and that "[s]he was supposed to complement his [her husband's] role as an earner and producer with hers as a wise spender and tasteful consumer" (59). In this way, domesticity and the separation of public and private spheres became the site in which gender normativity consolidated middle-class hegemony. Similarly, in *Uneven Developments: the Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (1988), Mary Poovey shows how middle-class ideals of femininity, which emphasized domesticity, came to dominate literary and social discourses. She also stresses the importance of separate spheres in making sense of Victorian gender relations and their collaboration with the class system: "[o]ne of the functions of the opposition between the private, feminized sphere and the masculine sphere of work outside the home was to mitigate the effects of the alienation of market relations" (77).<sup>22</sup> Others have made the link between separate spheres and the feminization of sympathy more explicit: Amanda Anderson (1993), writes, "[p]art of the way the wider cultural discourse redressed the negative moral implications of self-interestedness was to allocate a redemptive sympathy to the sphere of private domesticity and to the character of femininity" (41). Building on these ideas, I explore the ways in which George Eliot's novels work both within and against the domestication and feminization of sympathy,

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<sup>22</sup> Poovey shows the centrality of the doctrine of separate spheres to Victorian thinking about gender, showing how it came into play in a number of Victorian discourses. She argues that the binary opposition encoded in this doctrine "underwrote an entire system of institutional practices and conventions at midcentury, ranging from a sexual division of labor to a sexual division of economic and political rights" (9).

and how her peripheral characters come to be an important part of this work. One of the ways in which I do this is by analyzing peripheral characters who seem to unproblematically embody idealized femininity, and examining how their gender troubles George Eliot's representation of their sympathy by making it appear reflexive rather than deliberately ethical.

The separation of spheres did not apply only to the relegation of the middle-class woman to the home and of the middle-class man to the work-place: it also constructed morality and emotions along gendered lines. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall (1987) emphasize the importance of women's moral and spiritual influence and discuss the belief that women, from their protected place within the home, "could wield their moral influence and thus save not only themselves, but men as well" (115). Similarly, Poovey (1988) argues that "[a]s superintendents of the domestic sphere, (middle-class) women were represented as protecting and, increasingly, incarnating virtue" (10). In the chapters that follow, I explore the ways in which George Eliot engages with this belief, sometimes subverting it in characters such as Seth in *Adam Bede*, who takes on the burden of the family's spiritual life, but, at others, upholding it, as with the Meyrick family in *Daniel Deronda*, whose home is depicted as a moral and spiritual haven. The idealization of the Meyrick women's sympathy, however, is less complete than that of Daniel Deronda's own sympathy, to which the novel constantly draws attention, and so the novel maintains an ambiguous position on the relationship between gender and sympathy. In the chapters that follow, I

address George Eliot's nuanced and complex approach to sympathetic masculinities and male characters. This builds on the work done by John Tosh (1999) and others, who have suggested that men did play an important role in the domestic sphere, even as it remained a feminized and separate space.<sup>23</sup> Sympathy, then, might be understood as theoretically aligned with the feminine and domestic private sphere, but, like the doctrine of separate spheres itself, it was more difficult to contain in practice.

#### IV. Sympathy, Gender, Periphery: Meeting Streams

In the chapters that follow, I show how a number of peripheral characters reveal the ways in which normative gender stereotypes can work both for and against the sympathetic ethics George Eliot's novels promote. George Eliot works both within and against the Victorian belief that women were innately sympathetic. She, in general, accepts the ideology that finds an affinity between

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<sup>23</sup> In *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-class Home in Victorian England* (1999), Tosh discusses the rise and fall of the connection between masculinity and domesticity, putting its highpoint from 1830-1880, the time during which all of George Eliot's novels were written and published. "The domestic sphere", Tosh argues, "is integral to masculinity. To establish a home, to protect it, to provide for it, to control it, and to train its young aspirants to manhood, have usually been essential to a man's good standing with his peers" (4). By "domesticity," however, he means something else:

[i]t denotes not just a pattern of residence or a web of obligations, but a profound attachment: a state of mind as well as a physical orientation. Its defining attributes are privacy and comfort, separation from the workplace, and the merging of domestic space and family members into a single commanding concept (in English, 'home'). (4)

femininity and sympathy,<sup>24</sup> but subverts the belief that femininity and masculinity are always tied to female and male, respectively. In this way, George Eliot recuperates something positive from Victorian gender ideology; that is, the value given to sympathy as part of ideal femininity. At the same time, she uses peripheral characters to uncouple femininity and femaleness, making the sympathy associated with women available to men, as well. In this way, George Eliot appropriates Victorian discourses surrounding femininity—especially those of separate spheres and the angel in the house—for her own project, which is to encourage and cultivate sympathy in her readers. She does this without either endorsing or condemning these discourses outright, because her primary interest is in sympathy, rather than in subverting norms surrounding sex and gender. Ultimately, then, George Eliot manipulates periphery and gender in the service of her ethics of sympathy.

The novels on which I have chosen to focus—*Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Middlemarch*, and *Daniel Deronda*—span George Eliot’s career as a novelist, showing the progression of her thinking about gender and sympathy.<sup>25</sup>

The chapters that follow each focus on a single novel, and are structured chronologically according to the order in which the novels were published. In

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<sup>24</sup> Amanda Anderson (2001) argues that George Eliot was conservative in her view that women were the moral guardians of society: “ideal womanhood for her underwrites the bonds of family, community, and nation that form the object of reflexive processes of affiliation and endorsement” (22) and, in George Eliot’s writings, “women’s stabilizing powers counter the effects of dislocation” (14).

<sup>25</sup> I use the term “progression” here in the neutral sense, to invoke change rather than improvement, and do not mean to imply that, say, *Daniel Deronda* is more significant than *Adam Bede* in terms of its exploration of gender and sympathy.

each chapter, I analyze a small sample of peripheral characters who represent the range of George Eliot's thinking on gender and sympathy. Because I am interested in peripheral characters, and am concerned with the need to analyze such characters, who are often excluded from critical studies of the novels, the process of selecting characters for my analysis presents itself as a problem: exclusions are inevitable due to the sheer range of peripheral characters in the novels. However, I hope that by focusing on peripheral characters at all I am gesturing toward the importance of such characters in general, including those whom I was not able to include in this study. The process of selection has been guided by my desire to include characters who represent both highly normative and non-normative femininity and masculinity, and who contribute to George Eliot's articulation of a philosophy of sympathy. This study, then, does not pretend to be a comprehensive analysis of all of the peripheral characters in these four novels but, rather, an illustration of how peripheral characters focus George Eliot's gendered understanding of sympathy.

My chapter on *Adam Bede* discusses a number of peripheral characters but focuses on Seth Bede, because he seems to me to embody the ways in which the central terms of this dissertation—gender, periphery, and sympathy—intersect, and to represent one of George Eliot's most ambitious treatments of this intersection. In this chapter, I show how Seth's gender is made hybrid, in that he embodies traits commonly associated with femininity, but also others associated with masculinity. In this he contrasts with his brother Adam, who is represented

as hyper-masculine. The other way in which Seth contrasts with Adam is morally, in that he represents ethics based on sympathy, while Adam, especially initially, is devoted to a more rigidly normative moral code. Seth's sympathetic, flexible, and gentle approach to life represents George Eliot's ethical ideal, in which sympathy guides decision-making and one's relationships with others and to the community. Yet, even as he seems to embody George Eliot's ethical ideal, Seth remains peripheral. His primary role seems to be to balance Adam's virtues, much in the same way as the middle-class home and the wife who presided over it were imagined as balancing the immorality of the public sphere. Thus George Eliot's portrayal of Seth Bede reveals her belief that sympathy is essentially feminine, while also showing that femininity is not itself essential. He also shows the ways in which gendering morality can be problematic by marginalizing those people who do not conform to gender stereotypes. This opening chapter, then, raises some of the issues central to this dissertation, and explores both the dangers and the benefits of aligning sympathy, periphery, and femininity.

The second chapter takes up these questions in relation to *The Mill on the Floss*, and analyzes three characters: Lucy Deane, Tom Tulliver, and Philip Wakem. These three characters contrast with each other both in their relationship to sympathy and in their performances of gender. A conventionally feminine woman, Lucy shows great sympathy for Maggie, and this sympathy includes her gentleness and capacity for forgiveness. Tom strives to embody conventional masculinity, and the novel shows how this hampers his ability to sympathize.

Philip is less conventional in terms of his gender performance, as he, like Seth Bede, exhibits many traits that the Victorians associated with femininity. These include his sympathy, which is given fuller expression in the novel than Lucy's. Taken together, these three characters show George Eliot's belief that, while sympathy might be essentially feminine, femininity and sympathy are available to everyone, regardless of biological sex. For men to assume feminine traits, including sympathy, is not without its costs, however: Philip, like Seth Bede, is excluded from the marriage plot. Nonetheless, as he himself ultimately expresses, he feels that he has benefited from his unrequited love, and his ability to sympathize with Maggie, and to express that sympathy, puts him in the privileged position of being able to articulate and thus assert his own interpretation of events. Lucy, who also sympathizes with Maggie, does not have the opportunity to express herself as Philip does, and this suggests that male sympathy comes with certain privileges that female sympathy does not. *The Mill on the Floss*, then, both sets up an equation between femininity and sympathy and questions this connection, showing that it can produce sympathetic ethics while also treating sympathy in unequal, or economic, ways.

The chapter that follows deals with *Middlemarch*, and focuses on two of its peripheral characters, Celia Brooke and Camden Farebrother. Like Lucy Deane, Celia seems to embody conventional Victorian femininity, although, unlike Lucy, this emerges primarily through her embrace of the roles of sister, wife, and mother. Also like Lucy, she shows great sympathy, which, while it is

important to the plot of the novel and the development of the protagonist, still occupies relatively little narrative space. She thus, like Lucy, shows the ways in which female sympathy is taken for granted. Farebrother's sympathy, in contrast, and like that of Philip Wakem, is articulated more clearly and aligns him with George Eliot's own ethical position, which is that sympathy and the good of the community must trump individual desires and self-fulfillment. Nevertheless, he remains a peripheral character, and is, like Philip and Seth, ultimately excluded from the marriage plot. Yet, like Seth, Farebrother seems to find fulfillment in self-sacrifice, even while feeling that it *is* sacrifice. His sympathy is thus more dramatic than Celia's, which does not seem to exact sacrifices from her.

Nevertheless, both Celia and Farebrother, in their sympathetic apprehension of the needs of others, contribute to the greater good of the community. This is particularly significant in *Middlemarch*, because it is a novel that, as the title suggests, foregrounds the importance of community. Celia and Farebrother, then, show how both female and male sympathies become essential to the proper functioning of society.

In *Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot problematizes, without completely undoing, the affinity the earlier novels have forged between femininity and sympathy. For Daniel, sympathy is essential to his achievement of normative masculinity, as it culminates both in his marriage and in his finding a vocation. Meanwhile, the peripheral character Alcharisi shows that sympathy (as well as other cognates of normative femininity, especially maternal love) is not inherent

to all women. Lydia Glasher demonstrates the tragic realities of sympathetic economies, and shows how these can be brought about by gender inequality. In contrast, other peripheral characters, like the Meyrick women, seem to affirm the privatization and feminization of sympathy, and its relegation to the domestic sphere. Sympathy and gender in *Daniel Deronda*, then, exist in an unstable relationship. While they continue to inflect each other, affirming my claim that George Eliot saw sympathy as inevitably wrought upon by gendered discourses, they do so in less straightforward or consistent ways than in the earlier novels.

This dissertation examines the implications of the ways in which George Eliot links gender and sympathy at various moments. I am also interested in taking seriously the ethics of sympathy that George Eliot promoted, and part of doing so involves addressing the problems with such ethics, whether these be their imbrication with normative discourses of masculinity and femininity, or the ways in which their practice is complicated by economic views of sympathy. Both of these concerns, I suggest, come into particular prominence when one attends to the peripheral characters in *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Middlemarch*, and *Daniel Deronda*. The goal of this dissertation, then, is to begin to map out some of the ways in which careful attention to peripheral characters can enhance readings of sympathetic ethics and economies in George Eliot by showing the subtle and challenging ways in which sympathy inflects, and is in turn inflected by, discourses about femininity and masculinity.

Chapter Two: *Adam Bede*

“There are so many of us, and our lots are so different, what wonder that Nature’s mood is often in harsh contrast with the great crisis of our lives? We are children of a large family, and must learn, as such children do, not to expect that our hurts will be made much of—to be content with little nurture and caressing, and help each other the more.”

-- George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (350)

## I. Beyond “Poor Hetty”: Expanding the Periphery

In *Adam Bede* (1859) George Eliot introduces and grapples with the issues that will come to dominate her later work. This first novel suggests George Eliot’s still protean conviction that sympathy constitutes the best basis for moral life and that literature, at its best, incites and broadens sympathy. Yet, this novel also encodes an uncertainty as to the practical unfolding of sympathy in both society and literature. In particular, in *Adam Bede*, gender, particularly normative masculinity, both comprises the field on which these anxieties play out and serves as a structure that heightens and inflects these anxieties. The contrast between Adam Bede’s hardness and emotional reticence and Daniel Deronda’s capacious and generous sympathy and emotional openness highlights this. This points to George Eliot’s growing ability to reconcile masculinity with sympathy. In *Adam Bede*, however, George Eliot remains ambivalent about sympathy, in particular about the danger that a too-capacious sympathy might consume the subject,

thereby destroying his or her ability to act as an ethical agent, a danger that Ablow (2007) discusses in relation to Maggie in *The Mill on the Floss*. In other words, sympathy ceases to exist as such if the sympathizer allows his or her feelings to become so entangled with that of the object of sympathy that the distance between them—a distance that entails, and constitutes, individuality—dissolves. At the same time, George Eliot lays the groundwork for an ethics of sympathy supported—even, at times, produced--by non-normative expressions of gender. Suzanne Graver discusses this intertwining of sympathy and gender in George Eliot (1984), and argues that George Eliot upholds women's special sympathy as an important corrective to the breakdown of community. Like Graver, I see sympathy and gender in George Eliot as intertwined; I diverge from her, in my discussion of *Adam Bede*, by exploring how masculinity, as well as femininity, becomes implicated in George Eliot's ethics of sympathy, an issue that Audrey Jaffe (2000) discusses in relation to the eponymous hero of *Daniel Deronda*. I argue that, while George Eliot may tend to code sympathy as feminine, her female characters do not have a monopoly on it: characters such as Seth also practice sympathy in ways that, in Graver's formulation, contribute significantly to the good of the community. In this chapter, I will look at the markers within *Adam Bede* itself that show George Eliot's hesitations about sympathy, arguing that these hesitations are inflected by normative gender ideology that aligns sympathy with femininity, and that they surface in the uneven and ambivalent representation and treatment of minor characters. Such characters show how sympathy can

emerge out of non-normative gender, even though it has traditionally been harnessed to Victorian gender ideology that rests on a binary understanding of masculinity and femininity. Peripheral characters in *Adam Bede* thus reveal George Eliot's growing belief that sympathy and non-normative gender are connected and ethically productive, even essential.

As Graver argues, in *Adam Bede*, “the transformation of pain into sympathy experienced by one person in response to another becomes an emblem for community” (281). I agree that George Eliot sees the sympathy of individuals as integral to the functioning of communal society. Yet, I argue against Graver's claim that George Eliot believed “in the moral superiority of women” (228), and show that George Eliot often troubles the association of sympathy with femininity. This is not to say that she completely overturns the stereotype—she does not—but, rather, to suggest that she explores its tensions and challenges. Specifically, I address the ambivalences and subtleties of George Eliot's representations of the sympathy and genders of a number of peripheral characters. With these characters, George Eliot shows the mutual imbrication of gender and sympathy, and explores the implications of this intertwining for the ethical life of the community. I agree with Graver that George Eliot positions the sympathy of individuals as a necessary corrective to threats to community. I argue that sympathy in *Adam Bede*, while gendered, is neither obviously masculine nor obviously feminine, and that the sympathy of peripheral characters contributes significantly both to George Eliot's vision of the ideal community and to her

understanding of the ways in which gender informs the ethical functioning of such a community.

While *Adam Bede*'s four central characters—Adam Bede, Dinah Morris, Arthur Donnithorne, and Hetty Sorrell—dominate the narrative, secondary characters play an important thematic role in the novel, particularly as regards its ambivalence toward the relationship between gender and sympathy. Precisely because these characters are marginal to the main narrative events, their inclusion and portrayal point to conflicts around gender and sympathy that George Eliot deliberately includes but chooses to place on the periphery. These characters thus offer alternatives to a stereotype that George Eliot upholds by keeping them on the periphery, rather than fully integrating them into her main plot. The characterization of Lisbeth Bede, Bartle Massey and, especially, Seth Bede, provides insight into the novel's complex vision of the ways in which gender and sympathy inflect each other. In particular, such characters raise questions about the extent to which sympathy is compatible with normative masculinity. These characters highlight the tensions in the novel between masculinity and sympathy, and between narrative success and ethical worthiness. By narrative success, I mean the accomplishment or attainment of those extrinsic goals valued within the novel's community. These might include, for example, marital or vocational success. In this way, their inclusion in the narrative permits it to contain contradictions, and to maintain them in tension. These contradictions often entail George Eliot's ambivalent representations of the value of gender normativity, for

example, that suggest both a recognition of the restrictive nature of such normativity and an acknowledgment that it is not necessarily possible—nor, even, in some cases, desirable—to utterly reject gendered discourses surrounding sympathy. By challenging this gendering more directly, George Eliot would run the risk of foregrounding the importance of gender politics over sympathy, and she consistently emphasizes the desirability of promoting sympathy over specific sociopolitical issues.

Criticism of *Adam Bede*, when it takes into account marginal characters—as it often does—tends to focus on Hetty Sorrel. Such criticism tends to either censure George Eliot for objectifying Hetty, or to attempt to redeem her as a central figure despite her lack of a rich inner life.<sup>26</sup> Neil Hertz has argued that, while there are scenes of sympathy for Hetty, her ultimate expulsion from the community marks her as guilty, not so much for her crime of infanticide, as for her unwillingness to fully accept agency (111). Françoise Basch argues that Hetty serves as the central figure in the novel's communal tragedy (251), but fails to merit the author's sympathy because she represented everything George Eliot despised in women (261), primarily egotism.<sup>27</sup> Egotistic characters tend to fare poorly in her novels, and Hetty can be compared to figures such as

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<sup>26</sup> In *George Eliot* (1986), Gillian Beer discusses Hetty's lack of interiority (71). This is not to say that Beer dismisses Hetty, however. Rather, she reads Hetty as "a radical challenge to stereotypical portrayals of virgins and fallen women [. . .] Hetty is voluptuous physical life [. . .] Hetty's passion is physical and self-directed, not sustained by moral endurance" (69-70).

<sup>27</sup> Of course, male egotists do not fare much better in George Eliot's novels. That being said, they do seem to receive more of her sympathy. Compare, for example, the treatment of Arthur Donnithorne to that of Hetty.

*Middlemarch*'s Rosamond Vincy who, while she does not suffer as conclusively as Hetty, remains the victim of her own egotism and the delusions it produces. A major trend in reading Hetty involves describing the ways in which she contrasts with Dinah, something that Peggy Johnstone (1994), amongst others, has explored. Recently, Rebecca Mitchell (2008) has brought this tendency into question, in a fascinating article in which she focuses on the similarities, rather than the differences, between Dinah and Hetty.<sup>28</sup> This substantial and rich criticism of Hetty's strange position as both marginal and central, while both necessary and intriguing, tends to obscure other even more peripheral characters, including those I discuss in this chapter. The portrayal of these characters, perhaps as much as that of Hetty, contributes to the novel's fraught conception of gendered sympathies. In focusing on Hetty at the expense of these other characters, critics have minimized the importance of a number of gender issues in the novel, namely, feminized masculinity and successful motherhood (in contrast with Hetty's portrayal as the rejecting and murderous mother). Although embodied in peripheral characters, these issues are central to the novel's ambiguous sympathies with both normative and non-normative expressions of

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<sup>28</sup> In "Learning to Read: Interpersonal Literacy in *Adam Bede*," (2008), Mitchell challenges the binary reading of Dinah and Hetty, and argues that both are initially psychically incomplete, and that both women have to control their bodies as texts they present to others, and have to, likewise, control the ways in which they read individuals in their community. Dinah's control of her body is less obvious than Hetty's, in that she repudiates her beauty and physicality so that people will be more likely to accept her preaching. This, Mitchell argues, reveals her discomfort with her own romantic and sexual desires, a discomfort that she eventually overcomes through her relationship with Adam.

gender.

Normative gender, in mid-Victorian England, can best be understood as those gender performances that most conformed to the doctrine of separate spheres, a doctrine that, as Davidoff and Hall, Armstrong, and Poovey have shown, made gender the primary site where middle-class hegemony was cemented. According to this doctrine, men and women were fitted by nature to fulfill complementary social roles. The naturalness of separate spheres, however, seems to have constantly been a matter of anxiety, as indicated by the measures taken to ensure conformity to them: these included the differences in the education of men and women. The doctrine of separate spheres imagined the ideal woman as selflessly devoting herself to the well-being of others, and as associated with emotion and private virtue. The ideal man, meanwhile, was in control of his emotions, and was associated with action beyond the domestic realm. Separate spheres became a powerful idea in the nineteenth century at least in part because of the way it naturalized both gender and class. In *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (1987), Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall discuss how the doctrine of separate spheres, which was inflected by the discourses of evangelicalism, united gender and class difference to consolidate the middle class. Nancy Armstrong (1987), similarly, discusses the way in which separate spheres privatized virtue, thereby transforming political issues into domestic ones. In *Uneven Developments*, Mary Poovey likewise reads the formation of the middle class in the context of this

ideology, arguing that the line between private and public was a frequent site of contestation. Such contestation emerges in *Adam Bede*, as the narrative portrays characters whose performances of gender exceed and complicate those articulated by the doctrine of separate spheres, a doctrine that predicated virtue on gender difference, a difference that was imagined to be absolute, but that was seldom, if ever, so in reality.

## II. The Hysterical Mother: Lisbeth Bede

Lisbeth Bede, Adam and Seth's mother, is a peripheral character who bears a fraught relation both to sympathy and to gender. Although almost a caricature of overly emotional femininity and maternity, her shrewdness as a judge of character aligns her with George Eliot herself. Furthermore, the very excesses of emotion that she displays serve, by their exaggerated nature, to challenge assumptions about an innate correlation between emotionality and femininity. That is, Lisbeth's hysterics would not be so much commented on if they were merely the ordinary expression of maternal femininity. The narrator's relationship to her wavers between sympathy and satire. Mary Ellen Doyle (1981) has argued that Lisbeth "is a touchstone by which Adam's progress in sympathy is tested" (25), and I suggest that in this she resembles many other characters in the novel, from Seth to Hetty to Arthur. While I agree with Doyle's assessment, I suggest that Lisbeth is more than a touchstone for Adam's moral

growth. She is allowed a considerable amount of speech that is both colourful and memorable. As Geraldine Jewsbury wrote in an early (1859) review of the novel, Lisbeth “is excellent, with her affection and querulousness [ . . . ] no reader can withhold his sympathy [from Lisbeth’s vision of being displaced by a future daughter-in-law]” (284). Lisbeth’s accurate judgments, most notably of Hetty and Dinah, suggest that, despite her overwrought speech and emotions, she is a keen observer of humanity, a trait that is a necessary component of the kind of sympathy George Eliot promotes. Such acuteness and sensitivity to others are key to Eliotian sympathy, which places emphasis on the moral imagination. With Lisbeth, then, George Eliot underscores the validity of emotional intelligence and its centrality to sympathy.

On the other hand, Lisbeth’s excesses and moments of irrationality suggest the inconsistencies in Victorian stereotypes of femininity. The narrator treats the contradictions in her nature with gentle mocking: Lisbeth is “at once patient and complaining, self-renouncing and exacting, brooding the livelong day over what happened yesterday, and what is likely to happen tomorrow, and crying very readily both at the good and the evil” (102). Even Lisbeth’s spiritual self emerges as rather vague and indeterminate. She relies on Seth’s spirituality to compensate for her lack thereof. George Eliot’s portrayal of Lisbeth as an overly emotional character has significant moral implications, because it is from a conscious and coherent self that moral behaviour stems, and ethical choices are only possible if one first posits a stable and rational self that is capable of making

those decisions. Such a question becomes particularly problematic in the context of the Victorian conception of separate spheres in which reason and emotion are not only opposed, but, also, associated with, respectively, masculinity and femininity. Lisbeth's emotionality, however, may not necessarily mark her as a stereotypically irrational Victorian woman, a stereotype discussed by Elaine Showalter (1985), who puts it on a continuum with female hysteria.<sup>29</sup> George Eliot's comic treatment of her may, in fact, represent a critique of this very stereotype, because what is being satirized is not necessarily the individual character but, rather, the stereotype itself.

Focusing on the intersections of gender and sympathy in the figure of Lisbeth Bede invokes many of the most important debates in Victorian studies. Extensive work has been done on the Victorian middle-class housewife, and her representation in texts of various kinds. A number of critics have examined femininity and its ideal cognates of emotional responsiveness and care as one important basis of class advancement.<sup>30</sup> One of the main ways in which gender depoliticized class relations was in the doctrine of separate spheres, in which the

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<sup>29</sup> Showalter writes:

[b]y the end of the [nineteenth] century, 'hysterical' had become almost interchangeable with 'feminine' in literature, where it stood for all extremes of emotionality. [. . .] Hysteria was linked with the essence of the 'feminine' in a number of ways. Its vast, unstable repertoire of emotional and physical symptoms—fits, fainting, vomiting, choking, sobbing, laughing, paralysis—and the rapid passage from one to another suggested the lability and capriciousness traditionally associated with the feminine nature. (129)

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Mary Poovey's *Uneven Developments* (1988).

bourgeois housewife was constructed as moral precisely because of her separation from the public sphere of competition and self-interest. Similarly, in her *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987), Nancy Armstrong argues that the figure of woman, by being associated with emotion and with psychological interiority, became instrumental in naturalizing class conflict. Here, I build on the work done by Poovey, Armstrong, and others,<sup>31</sup> and argue that George Eliot complicates the imbrication of femininity and emotion, and of class and gender, by showing how they are caught up in questions surrounding the ethics of sympathy.

By drawing attention, through exaggeration and satire, to Lisbeth's emotionality, and coding it as feminine, George Eliot criticizes two pernicious

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<sup>31</sup> The complicated representation of the Victorian woman has been, and continues to be, a fertile topic of debate. Rita Felski, in *The Gender of Modernity* (1995), describes the "feminization of the public sphere" (90), a process in which emotion increasingly became an important marker of modern public life. In *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (2000), Talia Schaeffer discusses the ways in which late-Victorian female writers explored and expanded the bounds of feminine behaviour. Françoise Basch engages with the doctrine of separate spheres in her book, *Relative Creatures: Victorian Women in Society and the Novel* (1974). She argues that women were defined primarily by their relations to others, and that idealized domesticity victimized women. Rachel Ablow, in *The Marriage of Minds: Reading Sympathy in the Victorian Marriage Plot* (2007), discusses the expectation that the middle-class wife do the work of sympathy, and argues that this work was similar to that which was expected of novels. For more on this topic, consult Monica F. Cohen's *Professional Domesticity in the Victorian Novel: Women, Work and Home* (1998), Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (1987), Judith Flanders' *Inside the Victorian Home: a Portrait of Domestic Life in Victorian England* (2004), and Elizabeth Langland's *Nobody's Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (1995).

stereotypes. The first is that women are innately and inescapably emotional. Lisbeth's emotionality is expressed through tearfulness that is almost a motif in the novel. When she is first introduced, for example, the narrator observes that "[h]er dark eyes are somewhat dim now—perhaps from too much crying" (98). The second stereotype George Eliot manipulates in her portrayal of Lisbeth is that emotional expressiveness is incompatible with keen observation and accurate judgment. As Brigid Lowe discusses in *Victorian Fiction and the Insights of Sympathy* (2007), emotion and the observation of the particular were typically linked and made inferior to analytical reasoning. Lisbeth is capable of both of these, and it is perhaps at least partly because of the intensity of her emotional perception that she can be. For example, she is the first person to recognize that Dinah has fallen in love with Adam, observing to Seth "with a burst of vexation" (532) that Dinah would "'ne'er go away, I know, if Adam 'ud be fond on her an' marry her'" (532). By emphasizing Lisbeth's emotionality and its excessiveness, George Eliot paints it as exceptional, rather than as the expected expression of normative femininity and maternity. Thus, it is the very things that make Lisbeth peripheral that also allow George Eliot to use her character to challenge, if not completely undo, stereotypes about femininity and emotion. Furthermore, Lisbeth is both a comic character and a sympathetic one, which suggests, as does the example of Seth, that sympathy should not be the exclusive preserve of tragic or extreme characters and situations but, rather, woven into the fabric of everyday human relations.

### III. Sympathetic Misogynies: Bartle Massey

Bartle Massey the schoolmaster provides a particularly vexing case of the relationship between gender and sympathy. Unabashedly misogynist, Bartle Massey is nonetheless treated with, and shown to be capable of, considerable sympathy. His misogyny is treated as a comic character quirk, rather than condemned as an ethical failure. Furthermore, George Eliot sets up Bartle as a positive character despite his misogyny, and celebrates his sympathy toward his working-men students. This does not mean that the narrative shares his misogynist views; rather, it demonstrates the ability and need to sympathize with people, if not with their views. Furthermore, Bartle Massey's invectives against women prompt the reader to critically analyze the assumptions that underlie them. In these ways, George Eliot uses Bartle Massey, a decidedly peripheral character, to expand her discussion of gender and sympathy.

That George Eliot intends Bartle Massey's misogyny to be seen as comic becomes particularly clear in his invectives about his female dog, Vixen. He "always called Vixen a woman, and seemed to have lost all consciousness that he was using a figure of speech" (299-300). When Bartle makes his first appearance in the novel, Vixen has just had a litter of puppies, which provides ample ammunition for his misogyny. He tells Adam, for example, "I must give Vixen her supper too, confound her! though she'll do nothing with it but nourish those

unnecessary babbies. That's the way with these women—they've got no head-pieces to nourish, and so their food all runs either to fat or to brats.” (301). At the same time, Bartle Massey's feelings about Vixen are tempered by sympathy. He tells Adam, ““If I'd known Vixen was a woman, I'd never have held the boys from drowning her; but when I'd got her into my hand, I was forced to take to her. [ . . . ] I've wished time again and again I'd been a bloody-minded man, that I could have strangled the mother and the brats with one cord”” (300). Here, what begins as a seemingly cruel and misogynist rant ends as evidence of Bartle Massey's soft-heartedness and sympathy: he refuses to drown Vixen after holding her, which suggests that his misogyny is performative and exists more in his colourful speeches than in his actions.

Bartle Massey's sympathy has concrete, positive effects on the community. His skill as an educator comes more from his ability to sympathize with his students than from technical knowledge. Bartle's sympathy emerges most distinctly in relation to the students like the “three big men, with the marks of their hard labour about them, anxiously bending over the worn books, and painfully making out [the words]” (296). While, as the narrator observes, Bartle “was not gifted with an imperturbable temper, and on music-nights it was apparent that patience could never be an easy virtue to him” (297), this temper is in abeyance when he works with such students. Observing Bill Downes, for example, “who is turning his head on one side with a desperate sense of blankness before the letters d, r, y,” Bartle Massey's “eyes shed their mildest and most

encouraging light” (297). This is in some ways analogous to his treatment of Vixen, who may bear the brunt of many of his angry rants, but is nonetheless the object of his affection and, as already discussed, generous sympathy. Bartle’s role as a schoolteacher, and the sympathy he brings to that role, illustrates George Eliot’s belief that sympathy, far from being an abstract ideal, can be a potent force for practical ethical work, in this case, improving the lives of the working-men he teaches at night. Her portrayal of him draws attention to the accessibility of sympathy. Because George Eliot does not idealize Bartle, his sympathy emerges as something widely available, an ethical practice within the reach of ordinary, flawed human beings.

One of the ways in which the narrator creates sympathy for Bartle Massey without condoning his bitterness toward women is by stressing the gaps in the information the novel provides about him, so that like Adam and the rest of the community, the reader knows nothing of his background or past life, and is therefore not in a position to judge him. The only information about Bartle Massey’s history is actually a lack of information:

Adam was used to hear him talk in this way, but had never learned so much about Bartle’s past life as to know whether his view of married comfort was founded on experience. On that point Bartle was mute; and it was even a secret where he had lived previous to the twenty years in which, happily for the peasants and artisans of this neighbourhood, he had been settled among them as their only schoolmaster. If anything like a question was ventured on this subject, Bartle always replied, ‘O, I’ve seen many places—I’ve been a deal in the south’—and Loamshire men would as soon have thought of asking for a particular town or village in Africa as in ‘the south.’ (303)

Here, George Eliot emphasizes the impossibility of perfect understanding, and the corresponding need to suspend judgment.

#### IV. Male Femininity: Seth Bede

Seth Bede is perhaps *Adam Bede*'s most perplexing peripheral character. While he is secondary within the plot of the novel, the values that he embodies are by no means trivial in George Eliot's ethical vision. Adam displaces Seth in the marriage plot involving Dinah, and Seth is finally figured as only auxiliary to their lives in his role as bachelor uncle to their children. The narrative's denial to Seth of romantic fulfillment has been commented on, in passing, by a number of critics. These include U. C. Knoepfelmacher (1981), who identifies Seth with Philip Wakem in *The Mill on the Floss* as characters "whose longings and marginalization persist at the end [of the novels]" (359). Mary Ellen Doyle puts it more bluntly in *The Sympathetic Response: George Eliot's Fictional Rhetoric* (1981): "Seth does not deserve to lose Dinah" (27). While I tend to agree with these critics about the troubling nature of Seth's marginalization, I also suggest that his fate as an individual character and the fate of the values for which he stands exist in tension. Because of the high value George Eliot placed on sympathy, Seth's contented acceptance of his subordinate role is ethically central. In this section, I will explore how the centrality of the sympathy and selflessness Seth represents comes into tension with his position as a minor character.

Seth Bede, Adam's younger brother, occupies an uneasy place both within the plot of the novel and within George Eliot's larger ethical and creative projects. In Seth, George Eliot explores the possibility of sympathy being embodied in a male character, something she will later develop more fully in *Daniel Deronda*. His role in the plot is marginal, and consists primarily of his being an obstacle—but a minor one—to Dinah and Adam's marriage. Seth's unrequited love for Dinah proves to be an obstacle that both he and Adam overcome with surprising ease. Adam asks Seth: "“Wouldst be hurt if she [Dinah] was to be fonder o' me than o' thee?”" (541), to which Seth, with his characteristic sympathetic generosity of spirit replies, "“Nay [. . .] how canst think it? Have I felt thy trouble so little, that I shouldna feel thy joy?”" (541). For this reason, one can assume that Seth's primary function within the story is to help delineate Adam's character, both by way of contrast and as the object of several of Adam's defining actions. Seth's role in the novel, then, must be understood primarily in relation to Adam and his moral progressions. The novel's trajectory seems to thwart Seth's affective growth. Nevertheless, many instances in the novel prompt the reader to question the elevation of Adam and the virtues with which he is associated over Seth and his virtues. Furthermore, as in the example above, in which Seth gives his blessing to Adam's interest in Dinah, Seth's virtues are key to the establishment of communal happiness that centres on Dinah and Adam's eventual marriage. In this way, George Eliot complicates any easy identification with

Adam, and suggests that there exist multiple ways of living ethically in the world. In particular, she offers Seth's sympathy as a corrective to Adam's hardness.

Seth is as morally admirable as Adam, but in very different ways. In *The Ethics of George Eliot's Works* (1879), John Combie Brown suggests that, "Seth and Adam Bede [along with Dinah] present to us, variously modified, the aspect of that life which is aiming toward the highest good" (11). I agree, and suggest that the two brothers do indeed represent ethical striving, but that the kinds of ethics they represent are far from identical. Their virtues are described as complementary, rather than as antagonistic philosophies. Adam's virtues, especially at the beginning of the novel, consist primarily in devotion to a personal moral code that elevates justice and a strong work ethic. Seth's virtues, in contrast, do not spring from an explicit code, despite his devout Methodism, but, rather, from a gentle and forgiving attitude toward other people. In the initial description of the two brothers, Seth's gentleness emerges as a counterpoint to Adam's hardness. The narrator observes, for example, that "[t]he idle tramps always felt sure they could get a copper from Seth; they scarcely ever spoke to Adam" (19). Thus, while the narrative celebrates Adam's strength of character, it also introduces Seth's flexibility as a counterpoint. In this way, George Eliot herself shows some flexibility, in allowing the narrative to represent different moral attitudes without explicitly favouring one over the other.

This confrontation of moral attitudes embodied in Seth and Adam urges the question of whether the ethic George Eliot develops might be capacious

enough to make such seemingly polarized positions compatible. Because of the range of needs and abilities (ethical and otherwise) of individuals, sympathy takes on an increasing urgency, and must be understood as emerging in a variety of ways. Balance—however imperfectly achieved—thus becomes an integral part of the ethical system George Eliot imagines. Therefore, the juxtaposition of differing approaches to morality suggests the dangers of demanding coherence, and promotes, instead, the need for an ethics that can not only accommodate, but can benefit from, the variety of moral strengths to be found in any community, even if this requires a constant, productive tension between them.

An example of the tension between the styles of morality represented by Seth and Adam comes in the novel's opening scene. In this scene, both men are at work, and Seth has forgotten to put the panels in a door, a forgetfulness that incites the mockery of one of the other workmen, "Wiry" Ben Cranage.<sup>32</sup> Adam responds to Ben's teasing of Seth with anger and threats of physical violence; "striding up to Ben, and seizing his right shoulder," he says, "Let it alone, or I'll shake the soul out o' your body" (63). When Ben refuses to back down, Adam "turned him round, seized his other shoulder, and pushing him along, pinned him against the wall" (64). At this point, Seth intervenes. Unlike Adam, Seth accepts Ben's teasing for what it is, rather than as a serious attack. This allows him to respond in a sympathetic manner that defuses the situation. He says: "Let be,

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<sup>32</sup> That this initial introduction to, and contrast between, the two brothers takes place as they work is significant because, as Graver (1984) points out, "[b]eginning with her [George Eliot's] first novel, *Adam Bede*, love and devotion to work are associated with the creation and continuity of community" (85).

Addy, let be. Ben will be joking. Why, he's i' the right to laugh at me—I canna help laughing at myself” (64). Adam, however, persists, saying: “‘I shan’t loose him, till he promises to let the door alone’” (64) prompting Seth to say to Ben, “in a persuasive tone,” “‘don’t let’s have a quarrel about it. You know Adam will have his way. You may’s well try to turn a wagon in a narrow lane’” (64). Here, Seth shows his sympathy for Adam’s character, specifically, his determination to have his way, despite its difference from his own way of responding. Seth’s sympathetic way of diminishing the tension ultimately convinces Ben, as the latter makes clear: “‘I binna frighted at Adam [. . .] but I donna mind sayin’ as I’ll let’t alone at yare askin’, Seth’” (64). Adam, too, responds to Seth’s sympathy and use of laughter to alleviate tension, “laughing and relaxing his grasp [on Ben]” (64). Here, Adam is represented positively—his defense of his brother is admirable—but Seth’s role here also suggests the necessity for other virtues, especially sympathy, to curb the potential ferocity that characterizes Adam’s care for those he loves. In this way, George Eliot shows the practical and productive work of sympathy in maintaining communal cohesion, a value that, as Suzanne Graver has shown, remains at least as important in George Eliot’s novels as individual fulfillment.

Although the novel focuses on Adam, a later scene further complicates an over-easy identification with him and his virtues. The townspeople—characters even more peripheral than Seth—make and recognize distinctions between the two brothers, but also differ in how they value them, and, by extension, the virtues

they represent. This emerges in a discussion in which Mr. Joshua Rann protests Wiry Ben's making an analogy regarding Seth and Adam.<sup>33</sup> Joshua interrupts Ben, saying, "Idle talk! idle talk! [. . .] 'Adam an' Seth's two men; you wanna fit them two wi' the same last'" (79).<sup>34</sup> Ben's "contemptuous" (79) response suggests that he interprets Joshua as preferring Adam to Seth, but one might also read Joshua's interjection either as a reminder that Seth is not a surrogate of Adam, and/or as an indication that they are being set up in opposition, albeit a lopsided one, given Adam's privileged narrative position. Ben tells Joshua: "Seth's the lad for me'" (79). In this way, George Eliot uses Ben to remind the reader that Seth and Adam each embodies strengths and virtues that are valued by the community.

Tensions between the virtues represented by Seth and those represented by Adam undergird the narrative. Dinah describes their contrasting virtues well when she tells Mr. Irwine that "Seth is a gracious young man—sincere and without offence; and Adam is like the patriarch Joseph, for his great skill and knowledge, and the kindness he shows to his brother and his parents'" (155). This difference can be seen following their father's death, to which Adam and Seth respond in very different ways. Adam responds by working tirelessly on

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<sup>33</sup> This analogy is to the effect that, since the Poysers approve of Adam as a potential husband for one niece (Hetty), it follows that they must approve of Seth as a husband for another (Dinah).

<sup>34</sup> A "last" is a model of a foot used by shoemakers to hold a shoe in place while it is constructed or repaired. Because individual lasts were—and remain—unique, except in the creation of custom footwear, the implication is that the difference between Seth and Adam is significant.

making his father's coffin, Seth, by gently comforting (or attempting to comfort) their mother. The presence of these tensions point to the potential of Seth and his qualities, but this potential never materializes within the narrative itself. This ambivalence toward Seth as a character suggests George Eliot's broader ambivalence about the virtues and drawbacks of sympathy. Furthermore, it suggests her reluctance to associate male characters with sympathy in the same way as she does female characters. This is particularly striking in *Adam Bede* because it is so much more evident here than in the later novels, in which male characters—culminating with Daniel Deronda—become increasingly imbued with the capacity for sympathy.

When, as quoted above, Dinah describes Seth as “without offence” (155), she is adopting a move typical of George Eliot's narrators: describing a marginal character in terms of negation, of what he or she is not, rather than in positive terms. The narrator uses this technique to praise Mr. Irwine: “he was not vindictive [. . .] he was not intolerant” (131). George Eliot uses this stylistic technique to bring characters into the narrative without fleshing them out. Such descriptions may, although I do not wish to overstate this, minimize the subjectivity and presence of the characters in question. While George Eliot's description of Mr. Irwine's negative virtues—lack of vindictiveness and intolerance—is clearly laudatory, the contrast between Seth's negative virtues and Adam's positive ones remains more ambivalent. This ambivalence suggests that, rather than arguing for one set of virtues over another, George Eliot recognizes

that communal life requires both positive virtues that contribute to the general well-being—Adam’s dedication to work, for example, has tangible, positive outcomes—as well as more (seemingly) passive virtues like renunciation that balance the claims of the individual against those of the community.

George Eliot’s attitude toward Seth suggests ambivalence on her part as to whether or not sympathy, and an ethic based on sympathy, is compatible with masculinity. In *Adam Bede*, as in her other novels and nonfiction writings, George Eliot espouses sympathy as the proper basis for ethical thought and action. However, certain characters emerge to trouble this laudatory attitude toward sympathy. Dinah eventually gives up preaching and becomes a wife and mother, something that she might not have done had she accepted Seth’s proposal as he, unlike Adam, supports women’s right to preach.<sup>35</sup> The implication seems to be that sympathy such as Seth’s is incompatible with sexually desirable masculinity like Adam’s. Furthermore, the implication of Dinah’s choice of Adam over Seth is that women participate in maintaining the status quo, in which men are not encouraged to show sympathy. This expectation means that Adam’s kindness manifests itself in other ways, such as, for example, his financial sacrifice to keep Seth from having to join the army. Looked at in this way, one sees that even marginal characters such as Seth have much to reveal about the anxieties and contradictions that underlie a novel’s main narrative thrust. In *Adam Bede*, these

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<sup>35</sup> Dinah gives up preaching because women’s preaching is banned by her denomination, but it is suggested that she adopts Adam’s view that women ought not to in any case. Gillian Beer, in *George Eliot*, mentions this in passing, and notes that “[o]nly Seth stands out against the rightness of this judgment” (72).

have to do with the contradictions between the firmness of character that George Eliot seems to admire in Adam, and the sympathy that she espouses as the supreme social and individual virtue. The qualities represented by Adam and Seth, then, might be read as opposites—decision and determination, as opposed to openness and flexibility—necessary in the survival of a community.

Seth's character and characterization seem to exist primarily to highlight Adam's essential traits, particularly his difficulties in reconciling sympathy with a moral code based on hardness and restraint. Seth's presence in the novel highlights these traits in Adam by showing the latter's treatment of his brother in two instances, one of which occurs during the scene in which the brothers are first introduced (when Adam defends Seth against the good-humored taunts of their fellow laborers), the other of which is only alluded to, having taken place before the main action of the novel. This is the account of how Adam paid for someone to replace Seth in the army. As Seth reminds his mother, Adam has "'stood by us all when it's been none so easy—paying his savings to free me from going for a soldier'" (204). Both instances portray Adam as a protector, even though Seth does not need defending against Ben and, moreover, diffuses the situation, which Adam had rendered antagonistic. In both cases, Adam's ability to protect Seth stems from his material success and skill, in that he has sufficient money to pay for Seth's substitute, and, in the other incident, his skill as a carpenter has earned him the position of respect from which he defends his brother. Adam's willingness and ability to shield Seth, then, involves a de-valuing of Seth, who

seems (at least to Adam) unable to take care of himself. In this way, Adam's strength comes at the expense of Seth's (apparent) weakness.

Adam's strength also emerges as the more negative hardness that is apparent in his relationship to his father, while Seth's corresponding weakness can be seen more positively as compassionate gentleness. Seth's gentleness brings Adam's hardness into relief. Seth's gentleness, however, also highlights the positive aspects of Adam's hardness, which seems to arise from a strong sense of self, while Seth's sympathy seems to emerge from weakness, as in his tendency to give money to tramps (19). While this suggests that Seth is generous, it also suggests that there is a fine line between sympathy and vulnerability, and George Eliot seems to encode this difficulty as feminine. This gestures to one of the challenges with the ethics of sympathy, which is that it makes the ethical in many ways dependent on the affective. Because of the potentially unstable and excessive nature of affect, the ability of the sympathetic individual to act as an ethical agent must constantly come into question.<sup>36</sup>

This complex relationship between the physical and the ethical in George Eliot's novels has been explored by a number of critics. In *George Eliot and Nineteenth-century Psychology: Exploring the Unmapped Country* (2006), for

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<sup>36</sup> Ablow (2007) discusses this difficulty of how to be sympathetic and yet remain an autonomous individual capable of making ethical choices. In a reading of *The Mill on the Floss*, she argues that, for George Eliot, questions about marriage, sympathy, and the reading and writing of novels are ultimately questions "about how to establish ethically productive relationships between subjectivities when those subjectivities threaten to compete with or lose themselves in one another" (94).

example, Michael Davis argues that, in *Adam Bede*, George Eliot explores the possibility that the body “may become the site at which not just ethical awareness but a wider conscious control of the self is re-affirmed” (20). Physically, Seth is both similar to Adam and yet inferior. While Seth resembles his brother,

the strength of the family likeness seems only to render more conspicuous the remarkable difference of expression both in form and face. Seth’s broad shoulders have a slight stoop; his eyes are grey; his eyebrows have less prominence and more repose than his brother’s; and his glance, instead of being keen, is confiding and benign. (62)

The terms used here to describe Seth, his “confiding and benign” glance, suggest an almost feminine relationship to others, in contrast to Adam’s independent and assertive attitude to the world. Seth’s body itself, thus, seems to reveal his difference from Adam, the most striking part of that difference being that Seth is both mentally and emotionally weaker than his brother. By describing Seth in this way, George Eliot accentuates Adam’s vitality and virility, while implying that Seth is less manly than his brother. George Eliot’s feminizing portrayals of Seth ultimately link the sympathetic, or other-regarding, virtues with the feminine and the self-regarding virtues, such as integrity and (self-)discipline with the masculine.<sup>37</sup> That the moral and the physical are linked emerges in the similarities between Adam’s and Seth’s physical differences and their personal ones. By linking moral traits with physicality, George Eliot also raises the possibility that moral characteristics are to some extent innate, and suggests that Adam’s integrity and Seth’s gentleness are as inescapable as they are

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<sup>37</sup> This is borne out, as I discuss in the following chapter, in the characterization of Lucy Deane in *The Mill on the Floss*.

fundamental. This, of course, raises the question as to what extent moral growth is truly possible, if ethical attitudes are innate, as evidenced by the ways in which they are inscribed on the physical body. It might also be read as suggesting that nature itself works to multiply and balance the virtues that make ethical communal life possible. At the same time, this might be read as a pathetic fallacy: George Eliot might be projecting the moral on the physical to strengthen the sense of unity and coherence in the novel's characterization. In either case, the physical signs of difference between the two brothers have the effect of widening the gap between their respective virtues and failings.

The narrative robs Seth of personhood by implicitly comparing him to the dog Gyp, making explicit parallels in Adam's treatment of both. For example, Adam speaks to Gyp "with the same gentle modulation of voice as when he spoke to Seth" (69). Immediately following this, the novel reads: "Gyp jumped and gave a short bark, as much as to say, 'Of course.' Poor fellow, he had not a great range of expression" (69). One might observe here that Seth, too, does not have a great range of expression, and that this is, at least in part, because the novel denies him opportunities for articulation. Seth is also compared to other animals elsewhere in the novel. Wiry Ben, though he seems to mean it as a compliment, observes that Seth, whom he prefers to Adam, "'bears me no more malice nor a lamb'" (79). Not only does the comparison to an animal dehumanize Seth, it also

infantilizes him by the connection to a baby animal.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, this speech shows that Seth is often the target of men's jokes, and yet does not necessarily defend himself against these jokes. While this shows his gentle, forgiving nature, it also shows that others regard him as inferior, as a safe target for teasing, and suggests that he is not invested in asserting his identity or masculinity. At the same time, however, Wiry Ben's observation that Seth is without malice, despite the constant teasing, points to a virtue that George Eliot consistently celebrates in her writing. The ability to endure, and even to sympathize with, differences in character, makes communal life possible.

George Eliot further complicates the comparison of Seth to a lamb with an anecdote that shows the latter's strength. In this way, George Eliot refuses to set up gentleness and strength in a strict binary relationship. Both are integral parts of the healthy community as George Eliot imagines it, and they should not therefore be seen as antagonistic. Whether within the individual or the community, balance is key. This episode embeds the suggestion that Seth might embody such a balance—or, at least, one incarnation of it. Ben tells Joshua that Seth is “‘a stout-hearted feller too, for when we saw the old tree all a-fire, a-comin' across the fields one night, an' we thought as it war a boguy, Seth made no more ado, but he up to't as bold as a constable’” (79). Here, Wiry Ben shows not only the complexity within Seth's character—the mildness comingled with

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<sup>38</sup> The lamb is traditionally associated with childhood and innocence, as can be seen in, for example, William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* (1789).

bravery—but, and more thematically significantly, the possibility of different virtues coexisting within individuals.<sup>39</sup>

Despite his bravery in particular scenes (see above), Seth remains timid in his dealings with women. This is presented semi-comically, in his dealings with his mother, and tragically, in his unrequited love for Dinah. Lisbeth's unapologetic favoritism of Adam over Seth foreshadows Dinah's rejection of Seth and later acceptance of Adam. Whereas Lisbeth is "disposed always to take the negative side in her conversations with Seth" (106), Adam is "her darling son" (98), whom she loves "with the love of a woman to whom her first-born has come late in life" (98). Her preferential treatment of Adam stems in part from her awe of and respect for him, feelings which Seth, with his timidity and gentleness, does not inspire: Lisbeth "was not at all afraid of Seth, and usually poured into his ears all the querulousness which was repressed by her awe of Adam. Seth had never in his life spoken a harsh word to his mother, and timid people always wreak their peevishness on the gentle" (103). Again, the difference between the two brothers emerges as a contrast between gentleness and assertiveness, and Lisbeth's differential treatment of them is explained as a response to these contrasting moral and emotional postures. Seth's and Adam's respective virtues thus become aligned with the responses they invoke from women, and come to determine both their familial and romantic relationships.

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<sup>39</sup> Seth's courage in the face of the supposed "boguy" might also be taken as indicating his faith and the strength of his spirituality.

Lisbeth's preference of Adam over Seth, as well as Seth's seeming acceptance of this favoritism, predicts Dinah's favoring of Adam. Seth's timidity in his interactions with his mother also anticipates his shyness with Dinah. As he walks Dinah home, Seth is "timidly revolving something he wanted to say to her" (91). Seth is feminized even in the midst of proposing to Dinah:

[w]hen Seth had once begun to urge his suit, he went on earnestly and almost hurriedly, lest Dinah should speak some decisive word before he had poured forth all the arguments he had prepared. His cheeks became flushed as he went on his mild grey eyes filled with tears, and his voice trembled as he spoke the last sentence. (93)

Here, Seth's eyes fill with tears; it is difficult to imagine Adam's doing likewise.

And after Dinah rejects his proposal, Seth again takes refuge in tears. He

chose to turn back along the fields through which he and Dinah had already passed; and I think his blue linen handkerchief was very wet with tears long before he had made up his mind that it was time for him to set his face steadily homewards. He was but three-and-twenty, and had only just learned what it is to love—to love with that great adoration which a young man gives to a woman whom he feels to be greater and better than himself. (96)

Here, as in other passages about Seth, the narrator alludes to nineteenth-century stereotypes about femininity, namely, in this case, ignorance and innocence in matters of romance, the subjugation of the self in relation to the loved other, as well as tearfulness and emotionality. By feminizing Seth in this way, George Eliot both de-naturalizes gender and brings gendered representations of sympathy under pressure without altogether rejecting the gendering of sympathy as feminine. She creates, in Seth, a male character who displays qualities traditionally ascribed to women. At the same time, however, Dinah's rejection of

Seth, together with her later acceptance of the more conventionally masculine Adam, implies a criticism of Seth's hybrid gender or, at least, an acknowledgment that his femininity, despite its positive cognate of sympathy, excludes him from the traditional romance narrative that ends in marriage.

While the narrator urges sympathy for Dinah and Seth, it is more in the interest of promoting sympathy for ordinary people in general, and in her novel in particular, than it is about Seth or, here, even Dinah. In a passage often discussed by critics interested in George Eliot's linking of realism and sympathy, the narrator observes:

we can hardly think Dinah and Seth beneath our sympathy, accustomed as we may be to weep over the loftier sorrows of heroines in satin boots and crinoline, and of heroes riding fiery horses, themselves ridden by still more fiery passions. (97-98)

While none of the characters in the novel wear "satin boots and crinoline," Seth seems particularly removed from the sphere of the heroic. Just as the narrator will later say "poor Hetty," here she writes:<sup>40</sup>

Poor Seth! He was never on horseback in his life except once, when he was a little lad, and Mr. Jonathan Burge took him up behind, telling him to 'hold on tight'; and instead of bursting out into wild accusing apostrophes to God and destiny, he is resolving, as he now walks homewards under the solemn starlight, to repress his sadness, to be less bent on having his own will, and to live more for others, as Dinah does. (98)

Seth, then, is an object of narrative pity, and he remains "poor Seth" to the very end. He therefore becomes an object by which the narrator can demonstrate her

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<sup>40</sup> An excellent analysis of the narrative's attitude toward Hetty can be found in the chapter "Poor Hetty" in Neil Hertz's *George Eliot's Pulse* (2003).

own sympathy. At the same time, however, Seth's own capacity for generous sympathy actually aligns him with the sympathetic narrator.

Seth's courtship of Dinah remains unsuccessful, and he is ultimately desexualized in the role of bachelor uncle to Adam and Dinah's children. Nancy Henry (2001) describes Seth, in passing, as asexual, and aligns him for this reason with Silas Marner (61).<sup>41</sup> At the wedding of Adam and Dinah, Seth is described as "serenely happy" as he escorts his mother, a state of mind that seems unlikely at the marriage of his brother and the woman he once loved. In the epilogue, seven years later, walking with Dinah, Seth offers to carry her son, "[a] kindness which young Addy acknowledged by drumming his heels with promising force against uncle Seth's chest" (571), thus inheriting Adam's unspoken dominance of Seth. "But," the narrator states, "to walk by Dinah's side, and be tyrannized over by Dinah and Adam's children, was uncle Seth's earthly happiness" (571). In this way, the narrative seems to deny Seth self-fulfillment in the form of a family of his own, but also insists that Seth's auxiliary role is sufficient for him, suggesting that fulfillment might be understood in other, less tangible ways than participation in the economy of marriage and procreation. At the same time, self-sacrifice and lack of egotism remain for George Eliot, as later novels such as *The Mill on the Floss* make clear, the supreme form of ethical being-in-the-world.

The high value George Eliot placed on self-sacrifice has been noted often, by,

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<sup>41</sup> Similarly, U. C. Knoepfelmacher, in "Unveiling Men: Power and Masculinity in George Eliot's Fiction" (1981), describes Seth as an "avuncular figure," along with Mr. Gilfil, Farebrother, "that asexual male mother, Silas Marner" and others. (139)

amongst others, Suzanne Graver, George Levine, and Elaine Showalter.

Therefore, while one might find Seth's happiness in his auxiliary role uncomfortable, this ignores the fact that, for George Eliot, self-sacrifice for the good of the community is ultimately more important than individual fulfillment in the form of, for example, romantic satisfaction.

That Seth might find fulfillment in self-sacrifice (or apparent self-sacrifice) makes sense in the context of his commitment to spirituality. At the same time, this commitment also informs the ways in which Seth's gender can be interpreted. For the Victorians, the relationship between gender and spirituality or religion was in flux, largely because both gender and religion themselves were coming under pressure and themselves in flux. New developments in religion—in the form of both the pressures from scientific discoveries and, more pertinently to *Adam Bede*, the increasing presence and power of dissenting sects and evangelicalism—meant that religion was becoming both a site that could accommodate multiple expressions of gender and, consequently, one in which gender became a constant source of anxiety. The frequently demoralizing quality of work under capitalism meant that religion was increasingly domesticated, and, therefore, increasingly associated with women and the private sphere. At the same time, however, movements like Charles Kingsley's 'muscular Christianity' attempted to create and enforce connections between masculinity and religion.<sup>42</sup>

Given this context, it becomes clear how Dinah's preaching was both a possibility

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<sup>42</sup> See Donald E. Hall's *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age* (2006).

and a source of unease for many members of the community. Similarly, it shows how Seth's devout spirituality informs, in ways that are sometimes contradictory, the way in which his gender can be read.<sup>43</sup> Dennis S. Gouws (2008), for example, argues that Seth's embrace of evangelical Christianity encodes the homoerotic potential of the Victorian bachelor. However compelling such arguments may be, however, I suggest that Seth's strong feelings for Dinah trouble a reading of his bachelorhood as signaling homoerotic desire or identification, just as his resignation to the role of bachelor uncle makes it impossible to read his desire as straightforwardly heterosexual. Rather, Seth's desire and identity seem to represent the dangers of essentialism and categorization.

Like his spirituality, Seth's emotionality seems to feminize him. His emotions, unlike Adam's, are bodily and therefore legible to other characters. This is most vividly described in the passages involving Seth's courtship of Dinah. His afore-discussed proposal to Dinah contrasts with Adam's, in which it is Dinah who betrays her emotions physically: "Dinah's lips became pale, like her cheeks, and she trembled violently under the shock of painful joy. Her hands were cold as death between Adam's" (544). Furthermore, Adam's strength here contains Dinah's emotion: "[s]he could not draw them [her hands] away, because he held them fast" (544). The suggestion of these two passages, taken together, is that Seth is not a fit partner for Dinah because he is not capable of constraining

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<sup>43</sup> In this, he is reminiscent of the preachers Meynard and Tryan in George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857). Although Seth does not preach, he bears a resemblance to these characters, who are portrayed as vulnerable, confessional, and suffering, while at the same time morally effective in their communities.

his emotions, let alone hers. At the same time, it is unclear as to what degree George Eliot accepts emotional restraint as an unreserved good. Certainly she values self-restraint (as her depiction of Arthur's lack thereof illustrates), but she also consistently gives a high value to emotion. The ideal, then, would seem to be some sort of middle-ground between Adam's restraint and Seth's openness.

Seth is also associated with Victorian femininity in more concrete ways. Specifically, he is shown doing housework, and the narrator explicitly notes that this is a feminizing move. The narrator relates that, "through Lisbeth's obstinate refusal to have any woman-helper in the house, he [Seth] had learned to make himself, as Adam said, 'very handy in the housework'" (528). The sentence continues, showing that sympathy motivates Seth's helpfulness: "that he might save his mother from too great weariness" (528). Still, the narrator registers an ambiguity: "on which ground I hope you will not think him unmanly, any more than you can have thought the gallant Colonel Bath unmanly when he made the gruel for his invalid sister" (528).<sup>44</sup> Although the narrator claims here to be defending Seth against potential charges of unmanliness, the very presence of such a caveat serves to reify it, and perhaps even to ensure that the reader associates Seth with stereotypical femininity. This is further heightened by the fact that the comparison here is to a military man, which Seth is most certainly not, as Adam has paid for his substitute in the army. For this reason, George Eliot's comparison of Seth to a military man is multilayered, and, refuses to

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<sup>44</sup> The allusion is to a character in Henry Fielding's *Amelia* (1751).

identify either the military man or housework as definitive markers of masculinity or femininity. In juxtaposing housework with military service, and bringing them together in the figure of Seth, George Eliot challenges not only how his gender might be interpreted but, also, how and why masculinity and femininity become associated with certain cultural practices, suggesting the constructed nature of gender itself.

George Eliot's insistence on Adam's hardness, and corresponding stress on Seth's softness, raises a number of questions, particularly in the context of George Eliot's oeuvre as a whole. In *Adam Bede*, as in *Middlemarch*, George Eliot measures the protagonist's moral growth by his or her ability to overcome hardness, or a rigid sense of ethics, in favour of a more capacious and sympathetic sense. However, Seth's brand of sympathy does not seem to be what George Eliot has in mind as an ideal. Sympathy, for George Eliot, is an ethical process that requires not only gentleness, but, also, a thoughtful way of relating to others. It must be a matter of choice to be truly ethical, rather than a reflexive way of relating to the world. For it is Adam, not Seth, who carries away the rewards—Dinah, professional success, children—that are denied Seth. Seth's characterization and fate thus suggest George Eliot's ambivalence about sympathy—or, at least, sympathy that manifests itself in primarily passive ways—as a sufficient basis for ethical life. Because this ambivalence is less pronounced in the later novels, *Adam Bede* can be seen as a tentative exploration of what it would mean for sympathy to constitute a significant part of both living ethically

and of crafting the realist novel. It also seems that, if one compares Seth Bede with the title character of *Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot has yet to see sympathy as compatible with masculinity, or to see traditional masculine virtues of hardness and emotional restraint as necessary ingredients in the characterization of masculinity.

## V. Conclusion

George Eliot's ambivalent treatment of marginal characters such as Seth Bede, Lisbeth Bede, and Bartle Massey in *Adam Bede* reveals her anxieties about the novel's moral trajectory and about the connections between ethics and gender. In particular, George Eliot seems unsure about how to reconcile sympathy with normative masculinity, which compete for precedence in the novel. Seth's characterization is especially illustrative of the ways in which normative gender ideology hampers the mobilization of sympathy as an ethical force. Similarly, Bartle Massey's strange combination of misogyny and sympathy actually undermines gender stereotypes, in that it challenges the stereotype that women, but not men, are inherently sympathetic. The institution of gender is so powerful that allying sympathy with femininity becomes an effective way of preventing many men from embracing it as the ground for their moral code. This problem is, if not resolved, at least further explored in her later novels, particularly *Daniel Deronda*. Peripheral female characters in *Adam Bede* also unsettle feminine

ideology, by bringing into question the polarized styles of femininity that Dinah and Hetty seem to represent. Despite Dinah's conventional fate, Adam's sometimes stereotypical masculinity, and the novel's seeming indictment of non-maternal women, *Adam Bede*, through its peripheral characters, also suggests complex gender alternatives, and shows them to be integral to an ethics of sympathy. Peripheral characters allow George Eliot to gesture to both alternative ethical and gendered positions. While she seeks to challenge the dominant discourse that limits the definitions of gender roles, she remains hampered by these limits in her understanding of the world she describes. Peripheral characters reveal how George Eliot is both trapped by and works within discourse, struggling to balance what it is possible to say and still be understood while challenging normative structures.

Chapter Three: *The Mill on the Floss*

“[ . . . ] a woman who was loving and thoughtful of other women, not giving them Judas-kisses with eyes askance on their welcome defects, but with real care and vision for their half-hidden pains and mortifications, with long ruminating enjoyment of little pleasures prepared for them.”

-- George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (370)

I. Shifting Sympathies

While *Adam Bede* focuses on a male protagonist and his moral growth, *The Mill on the Floss* is about the moral growth of a woman, and explicitly highlights

the ways in which gender inflects the options available to her. Maggie Tulliver contrasts in many ways with Adam, but, for my purposes here, the most important difference between them is that Maggie's moral code is based on sympathy and emotion, while Adam's is firmly anchored in integrity and principle. *The Mill on the Floss* celebrates Maggie's capacity for sympathy, while also showing, and lamenting, that this sympathy often clashes with the normative code of society, a code that deals with women in particularly harsh ways. George Eliot's interest in how femininity is constructed along with sympathy informs not only her characterization of Maggie, but of all the female characters in the novel. That is, she shows how expectations that women behave sympathetically construct and determine their identities and range of action. In particular, Maggie's cousin Lucy Deane seems to represent conventional femininity. With Lucy, George Eliot explores the tensions inherent in Victorian femininity. Lucy is a peripheral character: her appearances in the novel are relatively few and her interiority and perspective seldom come into the novel. Her presence in the novel highlights George Eliot's discomfort with the ideology of femininity, specifically, with the ways in which this ideology limits the possibilities open to women for autonomous ethical action. Similarly, Maggie's brother, Tom Tulliver, seems in many ways to represent conventional masculinity and its constraints. More central than Lucy, Tom remains peripheral to Maggie, but nonetheless plays an important thematic role in the novel, in that his character shows the ways in which Victorian ideas about masculinity curtailed sympathy. Taken together, Lucy and

Tom represent two extremes, and therefore show George Eliot's critique of the binary system of gender. George Eliot further heightens this critique through her portrayal of Philip Wakem, a male character who exhibits feminine traits, including sympathy. Lucy, Tom, and Philip show the multiple ways in which gender, sex, and sympathy can produce each other, and the implications of their mutual imbrication.

*The Mill on the Floss* also elaborates on the problem of economic understandings of sympathy. It shows how completely at odds such understandings are with sympathetic ethics, and how, indeed, they threaten to undermine such ethics. Ablow points out this problem, suggesting that the dynamic that governs Maggie's relationships with Philip and Lucy, two of the characters I discuss in this chapter, is essentially economic, in that it involves a calculation whereby Maggie "compare[s] her happiness with theirs [Philip's and Lucy's] and so imagine[s] trading the one for the other" (87). The novel as a whole does not endorse this calculating compassion and, as Ablow points out, "this economic perspective is replaced by an ethical one grounded in a consciousness of the causal relationship between herself [Maggie] and others" (87). I agree with Ablow here, and take up her argument that *The Mill on the Floss* concerns itself with the difference between economic and ethical models of sympathy, but I explore it from the perspective of peripheral characters, who already bear a fraught relationship to the novel's own economy of sympathy, and who illustrate the desirability of sympathetic ethics.

Like *Middlemarch*, albeit to a lesser extent, *The Mill on the Floss* is the story of, amongst other things, a community. While Maggie's story remains central, the novel is also concerned with the relationships and events that both bind and divide her community. As a result, the novel includes a significant number of peripheral characters, from Lucy Deane to the Wakems to the Dodson aunts, amongst others. In this chapter's analysis of femininity and sympathy, I shall focus primarily on Lucy Deane, because her marginalization is most closely linked to the marginalization of femininity that remains a central concern in George Eliot's novels. Lucy Deane seems, like Hetty Sorrel, to embody stereotypical femininity, and, while this does serve to marginalize her, her femininity, unlike Hetty's, is not painted in negative terms, as it is associated with gentleness rather than with vanity. Lucy, in terms of the plot, is more marginal in *The Mill on the Floss* than is Hetty in *Adam Bede*, but she emerges as a much more sympathetic character, albeit one who is associated with femininity in ways that often seem to trivialize her. Reading George Eliot's major works chronologically suggests that she came more and more to sympathize with the conventionally feminine—and conventionally beautiful—woman, culminating in her complex sympathy for *Daniel Deronda*'s memorable Gwendolen Harleth. In *The Mill on the Floss*, I suggest, George Eliot has more sympathy with normative femininity than in *Adam Bede*, but still associates femininity with peripheral characters in sometimes troubling ways.

After discussing femininity and sympathy and how they come together in the character of Lucy, I turn my attention to masculinity and sympathy in the character of Tom Tulliver. Tom internalizes many of the Victorian stereotypes about masculinity, including the demands that men be brave, emotionally distant, and, above all, different from women. Throughout the novel, George Eliot shows how this hampers the development of his sympathy. In this way, Tom's character is a critique of the binary system of gender and the doctrine of separate spheres, as well as an illustration of the importance of sympathy to ethical and communal life. He is also a character in whom the links between gender and sympathy become clear, and thereby underscores the need to read gender and sympathy as interrelated concepts in George Eliot's work. Tom's identification with normative masculinity is inseparable from his lack of sympathy, and he therefore becomes emblematic of the ways in which cultural and social institutions, including gender, are bound up with questions of ethics.

Because of his hybrid gender and the importance his sympathy has in the novel, the characterization of Philip Wakem further complicates the relationship between gender and sympathy in *The Mill on the Floss*. Philip's sympathy has direct consequences for both Tom's and Maggie's lives, but it also plays a more important, thematic role in the novel. Philip represents and articulates the sympathetic ethics that George Eliot promotes throughout all of her novels, and shows why sympathetic economies are a threat to sympathetic ethics. He also, like Seth Bede, exhibits feminine traits, and is, also like Seth, excluded from the

marriage plot. Philip is identified with femininity both physically and emotionally, and this feminization is explicitly linked to his capacity for sympathy. His character thus invokes Victorian (and contemporary) debates about the relationship between gender and sex. For the purposes of this dissertation, however, I am primarily interested in the ways in which George Eliot uses Philip to interrogate the relationship between femininity and sympathy. In *The Mill on the Floss*, I argue, George Eliot ultimately accepts the equating of femininity with sympathy (and, by extension, morality), while at the same time rejecting the normative view that femininity is the province of women alone, or that gender is a fixed category.

To focus on peripheral characters in *The Mill on the Floss* presents certain challenges that do not arise with other George Eliot novels. Maggie, perhaps more than any other George Eliot protagonist, has been the central object of criticism of the novel in which she appears. This of course stems partly from the fact that Maggie is so central in the novel itself—compared to, say, Adam, who shares a good deal of narrative space with Hetty, Dinah, and Arthur. The other reason may be the oft-noted autobiographical dimensions of the novel in general, and of Maggie’s character in particular.<sup>45</sup> Some of the most provocative criticism

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<sup>45</sup> *The Mill on the Floss* has a long tradition of being read autobiographically. John Cross called Maggie “the best autobiographical representation we can have of George Eliot’s own feelings in her childhood” (26). In *Scenes from the “George Eliot” Country* (1888), for example, S. Parkinson noted, “in Maggie Tulliver George Eliot has sketched her own character” (123). In his 1902 study of George Eliot, Leslie Stephen called the novel “substantially autobiographical, not, of course, a statement of facts, but as a vivid embodiment of the early

of *The Mill on the Floss* comes from Rachel Ablow, Nina Auerbach, and Gillian Beer. Ablow (2007) argues that Maggie's struggle to be sympathetic while remaining an autonomous individual capable of making ethical choices makes up the central problem of the novel. She acknowledges that Maggie's conflicted sympathy for Lucy and Philip marginalizes them, although her focus remains on Maggie, and she argues that Maggie "occupies a privileged position to imagine what Philip and Lucy will experience if she decides to hurt them" (82).<sup>46</sup> In contrast, in *George Eliot*, Beer argues that the centrality of Maggie's intellectual growth in *The Mill on the Floss* asserts "the importance of unregarded life" (88), by which she means the lives of those who are peripheral within their societies. Auerbach celebrates Maggie as a subversive figure, in the tradition of the demonic

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impressions and the first stages of spiritual development" (5). F. R. Leavis, in *Valuation in Criticism and Other Essays*, reads "[t]he clear autobiographical identity of Maggie with George Eliot" as "peculiarly poignant" in the earlier part of the novel (65). In his definitive biography of George Eliot (1968), Gordon S. Haight discusses the many autobiographical elements in *The Mill on the Floss*. More recent critics agree: biographer Rosemarie Bodenheimer (1994) calls Maggie "George Eliot's most overtly autobiographical heroine" (102), Nina Auerbach (1982) notes that the novel as "explicitly autobiographical" (183), and Neil Hertz (2003) calls *The Mill on the Floss* an "intensely, if obliquely, autobiographical novel" (42).

<sup>46</sup> Ablow continues:

[b]ecause she [Maggie] has experienced analogous kinds of pain, she has an especially accurate sense of what their suffering will feel like. Yet rather than leading to concern or care, that imaginative power leads only to a selfish willingness to imagine trading their happiness for her own. Maggie's vivid imagination thus encourages her to indulge in an almost economic calculation in which others' pain seems equivalent to, and hence potentially exchangeable for hers. (82)

woman.<sup>47</sup> Auerbach and Beer are fairly typical of critics in that they are extremely sympathetic to Maggie. Even critics such as Ablow, who are more tentative about wholeheartedly embracing Maggie's character, share an intense focus on her as the primary point of interest and way in to understanding the novel. I suggest that our understanding of *The Mill on the Floss* might be enriched by complementary readings that subvert Maggie's centrality.

Maggie herself voices opinions about the limits of sympathy, revealing a tacit belief that sympathy is scarce and must be rationed—in other words, that it has the features of an economy. This becomes clear in her expression of sympathy for the “dark women” of literature (333), and in her fondness for deformed animals.<sup>48</sup> Maggie, then, believes that sympathy should be distributed

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<sup>47</sup> In *Woman and the Demon: the Life of a Victorian Myth* (1982), Auerbach argues that Eliot,

pours out on Maggie Tulliver all the sympathetic identification that was forbidden to *Adam Bede*'s Hetty Sorrel. In this explicitly autobiographical fiction the episode of an actual sexual fall becomes vestigial—Maggie's trespass is an illusion, existing only in its effect on the community and on other lives—for in her *mélange* of demonic and transforming power, Maggie seems a fallen woman by nature, in whom any activity is secondary to the intense ambiguous impact of what she *is*. Manifesting an eerie kinship to Ford Madox Brown's fallen Madonna, George Eliot's monumental autobiographical projection is both the witch Defoe imagines in his *History of the Devil*, spreading desolation and punished for it, and her community's legendary protector, the Virgin of the Flood, who sanctifies the spots she visits. (183)

<sup>48</sup> Maggie, the narrator relates, “had rather a tenderness for deformed things; she preferred the wry-necked lambs, because it seemed to her that the lambs which

on the basis of need. Her childhood experiences, as described by George Eliot, have brought Maggie to sympathize with those whom society (and literature) ignores. She has, on the other hand, little sympathy for certain other people, telling Philip, “I’ve never any pity for conceited people, because I think they carry their own comfort about with them” (333). For Maggie, it seems, sympathy, at least that of each individual, is finite, and should be distributed somewhat selectively. What makes Maggie herself sympathetic, among other things, is the lack of sympathy she herself receives from those around her (Tom, in particular), and her choice to sympathize with those who do not usually receive sympathy. George Eliot does not, I think, share Maggie’s view that sympathy is a rare commodity, because she constantly aims to expand the breadth of the sympathy in her novels, which suggests a belief in the self-multiplying nature of sympathy. Rather, she shows how Maggie’s childhood experiences have caused her to believe that this is the case. In this way, George Eliot stresses the importance of sympathy in the formation of character, and how economic understandings of sympathy come into being.

Maggie’s doubly coded sympathy challenges the reader to think about how sympathy operates, particularly in relation to subjectivity. It also suggests that sympathy is by nature and necessity always double, always fraught by contradictions that are potentially productive. By acknowledging that Maggie’s sympathy for others is heavily bound up with her own sense of identity and

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were quite strong and well made wouldn’t mind so much about being petted” (177).

construction of a self, George Eliot is not condemning that sympathy as essentially egotistical and self-serving, even while, as Ablow suggests, it has the potential to include self-serving elements. Rather, she makes the much more subtle and complex point that sympathy does not—or need not—mean the dissolution of the self. The self-serving elements of sympathy are in fact necessary for sympathy to operate successfully, because they preserve the self as a coherent subject capable of ethical action. This kind of sympathy differs from that discussed by Rachel Ablow, which threatens to dissolve the self in the process of sympathizing. To acknowledge that sympathy includes self-interested components thus serves two functions. First, it preserves the separation between subjects necessary for ethical agency, which, as Amanda Anderson (2001) discusses, was a central concern for the Victorians in general and for George Eliot in particular.<sup>49</sup> Second, it maintains that sympathy is not a simple emotional response but, rather, an ethical way of being that requires constant re-evaluation. Sympathy, then, includes the emotions but is not in itself (merely) an emotion. Rather, it is the basis of an ethics that values emotion, but also that values reasoned attunement to circumstance and character.

## II. The Light-Haired Lady: Lucy Deane

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<sup>49</sup> Similarly, in her discussion of *Daniel Deronda*, Reina Lewis argues that this distance is vital for sympathy.

Peripheral characters in *The Mill on the Floss* shed further light on George Eliot's nuanced working out of her sympathetic ethics, and of their relationship to gender. Lucy Deane embodies not only conventional femininity, but also, and more importantly, George Eliot's ambivalence toward that femininity.<sup>50</sup> On the one hand, the narrator often adopts a condescending tone toward Lucy, dismissing her primarily on the grounds of her difference from Maggie, a difference that rests primarily on the former's seemingly easy embodiment of femininity, which contrasts with Maggie's rebellion against the conventions that cannot contain her.<sup>51</sup> On the other, Lucy has many admirable qualities, including gentleness and, most importantly, sympathy, which George Eliot valued highly. Her sympathy, though, differs from Maggie's, suggesting the capaciousness of sympathetic ethics. Lucy's femininity, however, seems to detract from these qualities, in making them appear reflexive, rather than considered. In this way she has much in common with Seth in *Adam Bede*. At the same time, despite Lucy's apparently easy embodiment of conventional femininity, her sympathy for Maggie sets her apart from other female characters in the community, and contrasts sharply with

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<sup>50</sup> Graver (1984) has discussed George Eliot's criticism of conventional femininity, arguing that, in *The Mill on the Floss*, "George Eliot works to expose a certain superficial refinement exhibited by some women—including, doubtless, some of her female readers—by uncovering the vulgarity and hardness it conceals" (283)

<sup>51</sup> Ashton observes, of the scene in which Stephen Guest is introduced, "the cynical, playful narrative voice jars rather. Stephen and Lucy are both treated derisively, Lucy being rather too obviously set up as the sweet, insipid little thing against whom Maggie will shine (as Philip says, the dark passionate heroine upstaging the pale fair one)" (67).

the harsh judgments of the “world’s wife” (491).<sup>52</sup> It seems that, with Lucy, George Eliot struggles to dissociate sympathy from femininity, but nevertheless acknowledges the strength and value of sympathy, even when it is so closely linked to normative and oppressive gender ideologies. In other words, the system of gender seems to work for Lucy in ethically productive ways, but, as the novel as a whole shows, the problem with this system is that it does not work uniformly, as in the case of Maggie. George Eliot’s tentative solution to this problem seems to be to unhinge sympathy from gender; however, the problem with this in relation to *The Mill on the Floss* is that it involves a certain denial of sympathy, from both Maggie and the narrator, to Lucy as a character, rather than exclusively to what she represents.

The narrative highlights Lucy’s insignificance (relative to Maggie) by having Lucy herself emphasize it. Lucy refers to herself as “‘a little insignificant thing’” (371), and uses this evaluation of herself to justify Stephen’s sisters’ initial coldness toward her. She also explicitly devalues herself in relation to Maggie, saying to her that, unlike Maggie, “[n]ow, if I were to put anything shabby on, I should be quite unnoticeable—I should be a mere rag” (372). Despite Lucy’s manifest advantages of beauty and socioeconomic position, she participates in her

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<sup>52</sup> Of the community’s response to Maggie’s (apparent) transgression with Stephen, George Eliot writes: “the world’s wife, with that fine instinct which is given her for the preservation of Society, saw at once that Miss Tulliver’s conduct had been of the most aggravated kind” (491). She describes the townswomen’s lack of sympathy: “it was only to be hoped she [Maggie] would repent, and that God would have mercy on her: He had not the care of Society on His hands—as the world’s wife had” (492).

marginalization within the narrative. One should perhaps not take this to mean, however, that George Eliot casts Lucy as “a mere rag.” To do so would be to, at least partially, accept this valuation of her as such, and this kind of objectification runs counter to George Eliot’s insistence on understanding the subjectivity of other people. Perhaps, then, this is a critique of both class and gender. The text as a whole clearly does not endorse the snobbery of Stephen’s sisters, and their coldness toward Lucy tells more about the arbitrary cruelty of the class system than it does about Lucy.

Criticism of *The Mill on the Floss* has given but scant attention to Lucy, thereby producing and reinforcing her marginal status in relation to the novel as a whole. Most critical mentions of Lucy consist only in identifying her with George Eliot’s sister Chrissey,<sup>53</sup> although some have suggested her cousin Bessie Garner as a more likely source.<sup>54</sup> Some critics, mentioning her in passing, are dismissive of Lucy Deane. A select few read Lucy Deane more positively, even subversively, and it is within this tradition that I position myself. In *A Woman’s Portion: Ideology, Culture, and the British Female Novel Tradition* (1988), for example, Linda C. Hunt observes that, while George Eliot, in *The Mill*

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<sup>53</sup> Barbara Hardy (2006) summarizes this trend, noting that “Chrissey is sometimes linked with Lucy Deane through the blonde hair, neat clothes and tidy habits which George Eliot described to Cross and which make the contrast between the girls in *The Mill*” (12), but adds, “grown-up Lucy has mind, talents and wit which seem more like Fanny’s than Chrissey’s, though we don’t know if she is like either” (12).

<sup>54</sup> Gordon S. Haight (1992) suggests that “Bessie [Garner] seems a more likely prototype of Lucy Deane than George Eliot’s sister Chrissey, who is traditionally assigned the part” (17), and that Chrissey is the model for Gritty Moss instead (17).

*on the Floss*, is concerned with the shaping of femininity, she “is not particularly interested in Maggie’s cousin Lucy, in whom gentleness and compassion seem genuinely inherent” (143).<sup>55</sup> While these arguments are highly suggestive, they are not, unfortunately, pursued in any depth or detail, and I seek to remedy this in my discussion of Lucy.

Whereas Maggie chafes against conventional femininity, Lucy seems to unproblematically embody her culture’s vision of the ideal girl and, later, woman. Because of this, she seems to be aligned with the cultural apparatus that oppresses Maggie, even though Lucy herself remains throughout the novel highly sympathetic to her rebellious cousin. When critics of the novel mention Lucy at all, it is generally to note that she embodies normative femininity. The characteristics of normative Victorian femininity she performs include docility, gentleness, and unthreatening attractiveness (unthreatening because it never threatens to exceed the bounds of propriety). Rod Edmond includes Lucy in his list of characters who are representations of “the conventional middle-class young

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<sup>55</sup> Hunt undercuts this somewhat when, a few pages later, she suggests that,

despite Lucy’s goodness the reader always is aware that Maggie towers above her cousin intellectually and spiritually. Phillip Waken, not Lucy, offers Maggie the high-minded friendship which her noble nature craves. In short, Lucy is a ‘duckling,’ and a duckling can only make limited contributions to the life of a ‘cygnet.’ (152)

It is unclear the extent to which Hunt herself agrees with this (de)valuation of Lucy: she observes that “George Eliot divides the female world between exceptional women and ordinary women” (152), and criticizes this on the grounds that it dismisses the possibility of a female community, but does not comment further on the characterization of Lucy herself.

lady,” and compares her to Laura in Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* as similarly “blond, pliant and conventionally feminine” (107). Similarly, Lloyd Fernando describes Lucy as “society’s own ideal well-brought-up woman” (34). The problem with such readings, which associate Lucy with conventional femininity, is that they tend to include a tacit condemnation of that femininity. This condemnation fails to recognize the ways in which George Eliot allows conventional femininity to be associated with certain highly positive values, primarily sympathy, even while she criticizes the gender ideology that makes femininity compulsory for women. Rather than dismissing femininity because it fails for Maggie, George Eliot makes some moves toward recuperating that which it has to offer in the characterization of Lucy.

Lucy’s childhood blondness and docility contrast with Maggie’s unruly dark hair and rebelliousness. Whereas both Maggie’s hair and her character refuse to be contained, everything about Lucy is neat and manageable, and thus does not symbolically threaten to disrupt either the social order in general or the bounds of femininity in particular. The narrator remarks, for example, on Lucy’s “natty completeness” (61) and has Lucy “put up the neatest little rosebud mouth to be kissed: everything about her was neat” (61). Lucy, then, unlike Maggie, conforms to the expectations of conventional femininity. Because this is associated with her “neat[ness]” and “completeness,” George Eliot draws attention to the ways in which conventional femininity works to contain, and thereby control, female sexuality. Similarly, Mrs Tulliver observes that Lucy

participates in her own containment and physical control: “‘there’s Lucy Deane’s such a good child—you may set her on a stool, and there she’ll sit for an hour together, and never offer to get off’” (43). Lucy, then, is not simply feminine and conventional to highlight Maggie’s difference, but, also, to offer an illustration of the particular ways in which gender ideology works: that is, by emphasizing containment and control.

Stephen’s choice of Lucy as a potential wife is based on obviously shallow criteria,<sup>56</sup> but this seems to reflect more on the patriarchal construction of ideal femininity than on Stephen’s personal failings. This is particularly clear if one notes the resonances between Stephen’s imaginings about Lucy and Adam Bede’s misreading of Hetty’s beauty. Adam misinterprets Hetty’s childlike beauty as a sign of inner goodness—most ominously so in his reflection that she will be a

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<sup>56</sup> The narrator, in free indirect discourse, gives Stephen’s reasons for pursuing Lucy:

Was not Stephen Guest right in his decided opinion that this slim maiden of eighteen was quite the sort of wife a man would not be likely to repent of marrying?—a woman who was loving and thoughtful for other women, not giving them Judas-kisses with eyes askance on their welcome defects, but with real care and vision for their half-hidden pains and mortifications, with long ruminating enjoyment of little pleasures prepared for them? Perhaps the emphasis of his admiration did not fall precisely on this rarest quality in her—perhaps he approved his own choice of her chiefly because she did not strike him as a remarkable rarity. A man likes his wife to be pretty: well, Lucy was pretty, but not to a maddening extent. A man likes his wife to be accomplished, gentle, affectionate, and not stupid; and Lucy had all these qualifications. (370)

doting mother.<sup>57</sup> Stephen, similarly, judges Lucy's superficial qualities as proof that she will make an amiable wife. In some ways, this is as much a misreading as Adam's delusions about Hetty: Stephen's passionate attraction to, and pursuit of, Maggie suggests that Lucy does not have all the qualities he seeks in a wife. In other ways, however, it is a relatively fair reading: Lucy is indeed as amiable as her appearance suggests, and her gentleness and kindness, not to mention sympathy, are qualities that George Eliot constructs as crucial not only in women but, more particularly, in wives (as the failures of sympathy in Mr and Mrs Tulliver's marriage make all too clear). In allowing Lucy to embody the very qualities that Hetty so tragically lacked, George Eliot is moving, in *The Mill on the Floss*, toward a reconciliation of femininity with sympathy.

Stephen's "choice" of Lucy parallels Mr Tulliver's choice of his wife from among the Dodson sisters, in that he chooses first that he will marry one of them, and only selects Bessy after this decision, just as Stephen chooses Lucy as an avatar of the kind of woman upon whom he has already settled. He explains to Mr Riley: "I picked the mother because she wasn't o'er'cute—bein' a good-looking woman too, an' come of a rare family for managing; but I picked her from her sisters o' purpose, 'cause she was a bit weak, like'" (19). Mr Tulliver, in other words, wanted an attractive wife who would be useful to him, rather than an equal or companion. While he may be more blunt than Stephen about his

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<sup>57</sup> Adam reads Hetty's beauty as indicating a soft heart, gentle temper, and pliant character (215), and thinks, "[h]ow she will dote on her children!" (215).

motivations, the similarity is in the belief that there is little to differentiate one woman from another. This does not mean, however, that George Eliot endorses a reading of either Mrs Tulliver or Lucy as lacking individuality, but, rather, that they become exemplars of a particularly patriarchal view of women as fungible. While this view is clearly problematic on a number of levels and for many reasons, perhaps the most pressing of these is that it impedes marital sympathy.

Their status as default courtship choice is by no means the only link between Lucy and her Aunt Tulliver: the novel emphasizes their superficial similarities. The latter woman feels a kinship to the former because of their physical similarity. She tells her husband, of Lucy: “I can’t help loving the child as if she was my own; and I’m sure she’s more like *my* child than sister Deane’s, for she’d allays a very poor colour for one of our family, sister Deane had” (43). Despite their superficial resemblance in looks and placidity, however, Lucy is by no means a copy of Mrs Tulliver. Whereas Mrs Tulliver’s lack of intelligence is stressed (especially by Mr Tulliver), Lucy is, although not intellectual like Maggie, much more quick-witted than her aunt. This emerges in the scenes of flirtation between herself and Stephen Guest, in her skill in accomplishments, which are the only channels open to her, as a middle-class Victorian woman, to express creativity,<sup>58</sup> and even, albeit weakly, in Stephen’s assessment of her as

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<sup>58</sup> On feminine accomplishments (specifically needlework, with which we see Lucy engaged) and their scope for creativity, see Rohan Maitzen’s *Gender, Genre, and Victorian Historical Writing* (1998), which includes a chapter entitled “Stiches in Time: Needlework and Victorian Historiography” in which Maitzen

“not stupid” (370). For this reason, it is important to address Lucy (and Mrs Tulliver) as individuals rather than as embodiments of normative femininity, even if each of them does conform to many aspects of the stereotype. It is, perhaps, the very capaciousness of the stereotype that makes it so pervasive.

Lucy’s femininity is associated with her sympathy. George Eliot seems skeptical of the sort of reflexive sympathy that the Victorians associated with middle-class femininity.<sup>59</sup> She seems anxious to dissociate sympathy from femininity, a move that sometimes, as in her characterization of Lucy, marginalizes femininity itself. Because George Eliot defends sympathy in part by separating it from femininity, she participates in devaluing the feminine. This is problematic, of course, to feminist critics and readers, but makes sense within the context of George Eliot’s particular brand of cautious proto-feminism. As Kathryn Hughes stresses in her excellent biography *George Eliot: The Last Victorian* (1999), George Eliot did not espouse radical or revolutionary change. Rather, she was interested in how an expanded ethical vision could enrich lives

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explores the clash between feminist and class-conscious criticism in analyses of women’s needlework as creative expression.

<sup>59</sup> Audrey Jaffe, in her important work *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Repression in Victorian Fiction* (2000), observes, “in Victorian discussions [. . .] sympathy tends to appear explicitly as a woman’s issue” (17). Nancy Roberts, in *Schools of Sympathy: Gender and Identification through the Novel* (1997), explores the phenomenon by which “[w]e continue to view sympathy and empathy as female traits” (22). Both Roberts and Jennifer Phegley (2004) have done provocative work showing the links made between femininity, sympathy, and reading in the nineteenth century. In *The Perverse Gaze of Sympathy: Sodomasochistic Sentiments from Clarissa to Rescue 911* (1999), Laura Hinton, despite her interest in the masculine gaze sometimes implicated in sympathy, acknowledges, “[t]he reproduction of sentiment calls forth images of femininity, sympathy, and virtuous moral feeling” (2).

even in the midst of constraining social circumstances. So, while today's reader might not approve of George Eliot's ambivalence about disentangling gender and sympathy, it is not at odds within the context of both the historical period and the author's own philosophy.

One of the central problems raised by Lucy, then, is how to reconcile an ethics of sympathy with a gendered understanding of ethics and emotions. To deny the culturally-coded affinity between femininity and sympathy is problematic, because it threatens a rejection of the feminine. Yet allowing this affinity to remain unchallenged not only solidifies the binary system of gender but, also, weakens George Eliot's claims for sympathy as the best basis for a universally-available ethics. Peripheral characters including Lucy highlight this tension, by showing both the ways in which femininity can nurture sympathy, and the ways in which sympathy can allow individuals to exceed their own gendered positions without rejecting them. Sympathy and gender might be read as mutually-supporting discourses, in which case both threaten to become tools of dominant ideologies, just as Mary Poovey (1988) argues that gender ideology supported Victorian class and economic ideologies. Conversely, though, they might also be read as existing in a relationship of tension that constantly generates possibilities and forces a re-thinking of both terms. In this light, it is precisely because the imbrication of gender and sympathy is so fraught that it becomes a flexible and evolving ground for a living ethics that cannot be contained within systems or ideologies but, rather, makes ideologies part of the ground on which it

works and grows. Thus, peripheral characters, Lucy among them, become testing grounds for some of the possibilities, and dangers, of linking gender with sympathy.<sup>60</sup>

Much provocative research has been done on the way in which *The Mill on the Floss* engages with the trope of the dark and fair ladies, and it seems imperative to read the character of Lucy at least partially in relation to this trope, which is used to figure what Sharon Marcus has described as the “structural antagonism” (81) between Maggie and Lucy.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, and as Marcus herself notes, George Eliot does more with their pairing than simply use it to structure the novel.<sup>62</sup> Rod Edmond mentions them in his discussion of the pattern in a number of Victorian novels in which female characters are paired, one being “active and ‘masculine’, the other passive and ‘feminine,’” and notes that, “[a]lmost invariably the active woman is dark and the passive one fair” (107). With reference to this trope, and how George Eliot invokes Scott to enforce its relevance in reading Lucy and Maggie, Deborah Epstein Nord describes Lucy,

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<sup>60</sup> In exploring the relationship between gender and sympathy, George Eliot engaged with one of the important debates of Romanticism, which involved the extent to which people were products of nature, rather than nurture. In his 1762 novel *Emile*, for example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau naturalized gender using the discourse of sympathetic motherhood.

<sup>61</sup> This way of reading the cousins is made explicit by the text itself, when Philip tells Maggie, ominously, “perhaps you will avenge the dark women in your own person, and carry away all the love from your cousin Lucy. She is sure to have some handsome young man of St Oggs at her feet now: and you have only to shine upon him—your fair little cousin will be quite quenched in your beams” (332).

<sup>62</sup> Marcus observes: “the text does not support a reading of the two cousins as simple rivals for the love of Stephen Guest” (81).

rather simplistically, as “Maggie’s own blond-haired nemesis” (104). While George Eliot clearly invokes this trope in her portrayal of Maggie and Lucy, it is, I suggest, problematic to insist that this leaves nothing more to be said about the pairing of the two women. Rather, George Eliot subverts this pairing in ways that insist on, without resolving, the persistence of gender tensions in narrative sympathies. By drawing attention to the trope itself, George Eliot sheds light on the uneven distribution of sympathy, especially sympathy for women, and how normative visions of femininity inflect this distribution.

The economic model of sympathy, which Maggie’s initial reaction to the fate of dark women invokes,<sup>63</sup> is also at play in the townspeople’s sympathy for Lucy. Their sympathy for Lucy takes the form of hardness toward Maggie. One example is Maggie’s uncle, Mr. Glegg, “whose kindness, flowing entirely into compassion for Lucy, made him as hard in his judgment of Maggie as Mr Deane himself” (499). Interestingly, this articulation of a certain model of sympathy appears in the novel focused through more to less marginalized characters: Mr Glegg—Lucy—Maggie. Here, George Eliot shows herself to be aware of the flawed logic by which sympathy for one person transformed into coldness or cruelty to another. One could, of course, censure George Eliot for, like the

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<sup>63</sup> Maggie tells Philip:

‘I’m determined to read no more books where the blond-haired women carry away all the happiness. I should begin to have a prejudice against them. If you could give me some story, now, where the dark woman triumphs, it would restore the balance. I want to avenge Rebecca and Flora MacIvor, and Minna and all the rest of the dark unhappy ones.’  
(332)

townspeople, focusing all of her sympathy on one person—Maggie, in her case. However, by mentioning the townspeople’s sympathy for Lucy, George Eliot is not criticizing this sympathy but, rather, the form that it takes. Her point is not that one ought to be sympathetic to Maggie rather than Lucy, for this would be simply to reverse the model adopted by the townspeople, in which sympathy for one person manifests as condemnation for another. Rather, George Eliot is criticizing this model of sympathy, and not just its objects in this particular case. In theory, then, if not always in practice (i.e., in the treatment of minor characters), George Eliot rejects the scarcity paradigm in favour of a more generous and diffuse brand of sympathy.

The narrative is not without sympathy for Lucy, but this is tempered in a number of ways, one of which is the downplaying of her attachment to Stephen. This is comic at first, as when Lucy, without irony, tells Maggie that she prefers not to be engaged, as being engaged is so close to marriage: “I would rather not be engaged. When people are engaged, they begin to think of being married soon” (371). This contrasts sharply with Maggie and Stephen’s intense passion for each other, illustrated, for example, when he impulsively kisses her arm (442),<sup>64</sup> as does Stephen’s lukewarm, rationalized affection for Lucy. However, the narrative suggests that, while it may be more charged than Stephen and

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<sup>64</sup> The narrator relates how “[a] mad impulse seized on Stephen; he darted towards the arm, and showered kisses on it,” and that, afterward, Stephen “leaned back against the framework of the conservatory, dizzy with the conflict of passion—love, rage, and confused despair: despair at his want of self-mastery, and despair that he had offended Maggie” (442).

Lucy's, Maggie and Stephen's relationship is, if not equally shallow, certainly incomplete in its own ways. Maggie makes this clear when she tells Stephen that she has not given herself to him completely, and cannot, because to do so would sunder the part of herself that is firmly rooted in the past and in her family and communal relationships.<sup>65</sup> While many critics have noted this lack in Maggie and Stephen's potential relationship,<sup>66</sup> this has not, to my knowledge, been juxtaposed with the weaknesses in Stephen and Lucy's relationship. This acknowledgement is important, I would suggest, in understanding both how Lucy functions in George Eliot's attempt to show a multitude of human relations, and in how one might mitigate—how, perhaps, George Eliot encourages one to mitigate—her marginalization vis à vis Maggie in particular and the novel in general.

Lucy's ignorance of Maggie and Stephen's growing attraction is pathetic in both senses of the word. It is, of course, tragic in its consequences, but it is

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<sup>65</sup> When Stephen insists that they have both “loved with our whole heart and soul” (476), Maggie replies, “No—not with my whole heart and soul [. . .] I have never consented to it with my whole mind. There are memories, and affections, and longings after perfect goodness, that have such a strong hold on me; they would never quit me for long [. . .]” (476).

<sup>66</sup> In *Disorderly Sisters: Sibling Relations and Sororal Resistance in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (2001), Leila Silvana May asks, “[c]ould Stephen Guest have truly fulfilled Maggie's desire?” and argues that this “is doubtful,” because “[h]e is indeed a guest—more of a temporary visitor than an inhabitant in her life” (83). Similarly, in *Criticism and Ideology: a Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (2006), Terry Eagleton argues that Stephen “cannot represent a true fulfillment” for Maggie, because of his “personal flaws,” which Eagleton relates to his class position as “an overbred product of the predatory capitalism which is ousting the old rural world of her father” (115). In a feminist reading of the novel, Rachel M. Brownstein dismisses Stephen as “nearly as simple and unimaginative as Tom Tulliver” (204).

also pathetic in the sense that it highlights Lucy's lack of perception. When

Stephen meets Maggie, for example, he

was so fascinated by this clear, large gaze [Maggie's], that at last he forgot to look away from it occasionally towards Lucy; but she, sweet child, was only rejoicing that Stephen was proving to Maggie how clever he was, and that they would certainly be good friends after all. (381)

Here, Lucy is a “sweet child”—her innocence infantilizes her, and thus becomes not a mark of virtue but of ignorance. It also affects the ways in which the novel promotes and denies sympathy with her. If Lucy is a child, it is easy enough for the narrator to pity her—but not so easy to sympathize with her, as that implies an acknowledgment of commonality and respect for subjectivity. Lucy's ignorance of Maggie and Stephen's growing mutual attraction is thus doubly coded in what it suggests about Lucy's character. On the one hand, it can be read as suggesting that Lucy is neither worthy of Stephen nor overly attached to him. On the other, it can be read as illustrating her tragic innocence and idealism. In either case, it seems clear that Lucy's idealized femininity must be associated with the sort of sympathy that is morally admirable, in that it sees the good in people, but also pragmatically flawed, because it does not assist her in navigating the realities of adult relationships. This doubleness thus emerges as a subtle condemnation of the disjunction between the social expectations of female behaviour and the usefulness of such behaviour.

This returns to George Eliot's ambivalence about the relationship between gender, especially femininity, and sympathy, and about the ethical value of this relationship. As Ablow suggests, the Victorians connected sympathy with gender,

making it an attribute of idealized femininity and the role of the wife. This feminization and privatization of sympathy seems to undercut its potential as an ethical force for determining social relationships that extend beyond the nuclear family. However, George Eliot, while attuned to this danger, ultimately sees sympathy as having a much wider potential, even if its operations are most obvious in relationships between individuals. The feminization of sympathy seems to threaten its ethical viability, but does not necessarily do so, if sympathy is understood as a force that cannot be contained by normative ideologies such as the binary gender system. Sympathy works not only within the gender system, but, also, through and beyond it. As George Eliot depicts it, sympathy resists containment and subverts the very system that seems to produce it.

Lucy's sympathy for Maggie, rather than Maggie's for Lucy, is the ground of their relationship. When Lucy learns of Maggie's complicated relationship with Philip, she responds with a double sympathy—double in that it is both active and passive. It is active when Lucy mobilizes sympathy in her efforts to overcome the barriers to Philip and Maggie's relationship. She tells Maggie: “I shall puzzle my small brain to contrive some plot that will bring everybody into the right mind, so that you may marry Philip” (388), and, also, offers to take the blame for Maggie's seeing Philip: “I'll take the responsibility, then—tell him [Tom] it was my fault” (386). Lucy's more passive sympathy also emerges in her offering herself up as Maggie's confidante: “Maggie, you have secrets from me, and I have none from you” (387). Maggie finds immense relief in

unburdening herself to Lucy: “Maggie had never before known the relief of such an outpouring: she had never before told Lucy anything of her inmost life; and the sweet face bent towards her with sympathetic interest, and the little hand pressing hers, encouraged her to speak on” (387). Here, Lucy shows Maggie the loving sympathy that the latter has craved all her life, and of which she has found so little. Yet it proves inadequate, for Maggie is so invested in the patriarchal community that rejects her that it is primarily the sympathy of men (Tom, her father, Philip, and Stephen) that she seeks. Lucy’s sympathy, in this context, becomes devalued because of her gender, even while, as previously discussed, her femininity may contribute to her sympathy. One danger, then, of associating sympathy as a reflexive component of femininity, is that, given the patriarchal devaluation of femininity, such sympathy might lose some of its ethical force to work in the world. The very fact of Lucy’s peripheral status, and that of her sympathy, emphasizes this danger.

In attending to the characterization and treatment of Lucy Deane, one can better understand George Eliot’s evolving understanding of the relationship between gender and femininity. Because of her peripheral and underdeveloped status within the novel, Lucy remains a figure that can sustain the conflicted relationship between femininity and sympathy. She stands as a distinct alternative to the “World’s Wife,” who condemns Maggie, both when she visits Maggie at Bob’s home and when she later visits Maggie’s grave with Stephen. Lucy’s

sympathy is thus both compatible with femininity and a critique of patriarchal ideology.

### III. Tom Tulliver

Whether or not Tom Tulliver is a peripheral character is debatable, with Rosemary Ashton (1990) claiming that he is the hero of the novel.<sup>67</sup> Yet, he is clearly peripheral within the novel's economy of sympathy.<sup>68</sup> With Tom, George Eliot explores the ways in which normative Victorian masculinity curtails sympathy. Specifically, she shows how the demands that men be undemonstrative, brave, and, especially, distinct from and in control of women, prevent boys and men from expressing sympathy. Just as Maggie suffers from the constraints of normative femininity, Tom suffers from those of normative masculinity. John Tosh (1999) has shown how the polarization of male and female roles made women the primary guardians of men's morality and spirituality, invoking the belief that "men had a calling to do good in the world, but the moral contamination which tainted most forms of work made it essential for them to exploit the spiritual resources of the home to the full" (38). He also

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<sup>67</sup> She argues, "it is clear that Tom is the tragic hero of the novel; of all Maggie's loving relationships—with Philip, Tom, and Stephen—that with Tom is the most powerful" (44).

<sup>68</sup> By this I mean that he is portrayed with less sympathy than other characters in the novel. Ashton (1990) points out that, while "there is some muted sympathy for Tom," it is "always undermined by criticism" (91). Also, the values that Tom represents—order and justice over sympathy—are incompatible with the ethics George Eliot espouses through other characters in the novel.

observes that it was during the mid-Victorian period that “‘angel’ acquired its feminine and largely domestic associations [. . .]. Men could not be angels in this sense—nor could they be described by any other term which had the same morally elevating associations” (55). While Tosh explores the implications of this for marriage and domestic life, George Eliot, in *The Mill on the Floss*, meditates on its consequences for her sympathetic ethics. Tom’s character can be read as a critique of Victorian gender ideology, which emphasized difference, including moral difference, between the sexes, and shows the ethical as well as psychological damage inflicted by the doctrine of separate spheres.

Tom’s character is shaped by his struggles and desire to fulfill the expectations of Victorian normative masculinity.<sup>69</sup> This is entirely compatible with the route to manhood traced by Tosh: “[b]ecoming a man involved detaching oneself from the home and its feminine comforts” (110). For Tom, this often takes the form of attempting to differentiate himself from women, including his sister Maggie, and his rejections of her often take the form of denying her sympathy. When she greets him enthusiastically, by “jump[ing] first on one leg and then on the other,” for example, he responds “with masculine reticence as to the tender emotions” by greeting his dog before he acknowledges her (33). Here,

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<sup>69</sup> Tom’s identification with society’s norms has been noted by a number of critics, including Ian Milner (1968), who contrasts “society,” as represented by Tom, to “the voice of a community true to its own moral law,” as represented by Maggie (31). Barry Qualls (1982) also discusses Tom’s normativity, arguing that Tom’s approach to life “is the Utilitarian answer, a worldling’s knowledge of “‘what is right and respectable’” (148). Similarly, U. C. Knoepfelmacher (1968) claims, “Tom embraces the reality of St. Ogg’s” (210).

Tom's coldness toward Maggie is explicitly associated with his masculinity, making this one of many examples in which George Eliot stresses that his failures of sympathy are not merely, or even primarily, personal ones but, rather, failures in the binary system of gender that emphasizes masculine restraint as a counterpoint to feminine emotionality and effusiveness.<sup>70</sup>

Tom is morally admirable in many ways—he has a keen sense of justice and honour—but his conformity to a binary understanding of virtue, divided along gender lines, prevents these from being tempered by sympathy. The narrator describes Tom as “a lad of honour” (38) who has “more than the usual share of boy's justice in him,—the justice that desires to hurt culprits as much as they deserve to be hurt” (53). Tom's sense of justice thus differs from Adam Bede's, which places the emphasis on justice to the victim, rather than on punishment of the perpetrator. It is not, then, honour or justice that is being criticized but, rather, the danger that they may become punitive and married to the “desire to hurt” if unchecked by sympathy. This underscores George Eliot's thesis that balance is essential to the ethical functioning of both individuals and communities. A binary gender system is particularly dangerous because it rejects the notion of balance within the individual. As Amanda Anderson (1993) writes, “[p]art of the way the wider cultural discourse redressed the negative moral implications of self-interestedness was to allocate a redemptive sympathy to the sphere of private domesticity and to the character of femininity” (41). Similarly, Mary Poovey

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<sup>70</sup> John Tosh (1999) points out that “[a]ffectionate expression could [. . .] be encouraged in girls, while it must be restrained in boys” (115).

(1988) has described how “[t]he rhetorical separation of spheres and the image of domesticated, feminized morality” contributed to the consolidation of bourgeois hegemony (10) and how this disempowered women; with the character of Tom, George Eliot shows that it also had dangerous consequences both for individual men and for the moral life of communities. While Poovey’s primary concern is the socioeconomic and political implications of gender binaries, the doctrine of separate spheres also had significant ethical consequences, and these are one of the main themes of *The Mill on the Floss*. Absolving men of the responsibility to behave sympathetically, George Eliot shows, prevents them from acting in ethically responsive, and responsible, ways. As Brigid Lowe (2007) argues, “Eliot resists the ideological containment of sympathetic and altruistic bonds within the gendered domestic arena. She shows that such restriction both victimizes women and alienates men from the truth and joy of human connection” (236). Because it feminizes and domesticates sympathy, and thus stifles men’s capacity to behave ethically, then, the doctrine of separate spheres is as damaging to men and boys like Tom as it is to Maggie.

Tom responds to his feelings of powerlessness by asserting dominance over women. His independence, Graver (1984) claims, becomes expressed as “immovable and often cruel self-assertion” (199). Tom’s desire for control over Maggie and others shows not only how power structures block sympathy but, also, how gender binaries are bound up with other forms of control and hegemony. Poovey (1988) argues that gender, specifically the domestic ideal,

“helped depoliticize class relations at midcentury” (9), and *The Mill on the Floss* shows how Tom’s thwarted desires for social and economic dominance are translated into displays of power over his mother and sister. The narrator makes this explicit, commenting, after Tom’s disappointing interview with his Uncle Deane, in which Tom realizes that his education will not help him to secure a job and rebuild his family’s fortunes: “[p]oor Tom! he had just come from being lectured and made to feel his inferiority: the reaction of his strong, self-asserting nature must take place somehow; and here [in an argument with Maggie] was a case in which he could justly show himself dominant” (234). Here, George Eliot’s language aligns Tom with other characters: “poor Tom” is reminiscent of “poor Hetty” and “poor Seth” in *Adam Bede*. As Hertz (2003) has pointed out, the characters thus described by George Eliot’s narrators often suffer harsh destinies, while at the same time receiving “a pity as attentive and informed as it is generous” (96). Tom rejects pity from Maggie, however, and part of the narrator’s sympathy with him can be read as having to do with Tom’s inability to either give or receive sympathy himself. Because of Tom’s acceptance of the idea that men must be assertive, and that it is not only natural but right that they should dominate women, he responds to the family tragedy not with sympathy, which Maggie craves, but with an angry determination to make his way in the world. When he encounters difficulties in this, he responds by asserting himself in the domestic sphere, where he has the power denied to him in the public sphere.

Men's power over women thus becomes an (undesirable) alternative to sympathy that bolsters economic, as well as gender, inequality.

#### IV. Philip Wakem

Philip Wakem contrasts sharply with Tom.<sup>71</sup> Unlike Tom, but like Seth in *Adam Bede*, Philip is associated with non-normative masculinity, specifically with feminine sensitivity and sympathy. Philip occupies an ambiguous position in the novel's economy of sympathy, in that his physical disability prompts some people, including Maggie, to be more sympathetic, while making others, especially Tom, feel contempt and antipathy toward him.<sup>72</sup> Philip's own sympathy, meanwhile, illustrates George Eliot's own understanding of the ideal ethical force of sympathy, and is a consistent part of both Philip's own character and of his relationships to other people. This section explores Philip's position in the novel's economy of sympathy, his embodiment of sympathetic ethics and, finally, his hybrid gender, and how his feminine qualities come to be associated with his sympathy.

With Philip, George Eliot shows the fallacy of understanding sympathy in economic, rather than ethical, terms. Philip's sympathy is especially notable because he has received so little sympathy himself, with Maggie's tenderness

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<sup>71</sup> Ashton (1990) points out that Philip "is a natural foil to Tom during their schooldays at Mr. Stelling's house" (71), and that "Philip is from their schooldays a brotherly figure for Maggie, a loving substitute for the supercilious Tom" (92).

<sup>72</sup> Philip's disability is not the only reason Tom has these feelings toward him; he also inherits his father's hatred for Philip's father, and directs this hatred at Philip.

toward him being a significant exception. Because his mother has died, Philip does not find sympathy in the domestic sphere, which the Victorians imagined as a haven of sympathy (whatever the reality), and with the mother at its centre. As Claudia Nelson (2007) writes: “[t]he Victorian cult of domesticity exalted the middle-class mother as a fount of sympathy” (170). Ablow (2007) has explored the ways in which the novel came to be seen as taking on the role ascribed to the sympathetic wife, and this might explain, in part, Philip’s passion for, and commitment to, cultural pursuits. As a child, he suffers because of this lack of maternal sympathy: “Philip had never been soothed by that mother’s love which flows out to us in the greater abundance because our need is greater, which clings to us the more tenderly because we are the less likely to be winners in the game of life” (331). Philip continues to find little sympathy in the outside world. He recognizes that “every one, almost, disliked looking at him,” and he senses this dislike in Tom (161). That Philip receives little sympathy but is nonetheless capable of giving much shows the problem with understanding sympathy economically. Apart from the ethical dangers of seeing sympathy in this way, the example of Philip also shows that sympathy cannot be understood as a commodity, in that it cannot be traded or accumulated, but only given.<sup>73</sup>

Philip’s sympathy for and with other people is a powerful ethical force that overcomes obstacles that block the growth of community and development of relationships. This sympathy is vividly invoked when Tom suffers an accident:

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<sup>73</sup> In this way, Philip’s sympathy is, like the gift Derrida describes in *Given Time*, outside of the economic cycle of reciprocity and exchange.

[i]t had been Philip's first thought when he heard of the accident,--'Will Tulliver be lame? It will be very hard for him if he is'; and Tom's hitherto unforgiven offences were washed out by that pity. Philip felt that they were no longer in a state of repulsion, but were being drawn into a common current of suffering and sad privation. His imagination did not dwell on the outward calamity and its future effect on Tom's life, but it made vividly present to him the probable state of Tom's feeling. Philip had only lived fourteen years, but those years had, most of them, been steeped in the sense of a lot irremediably hard. (181)

Here, George Eliot shows her belief that sympathy can overcome antipathy and vengeance, and this makes sense in light of her claims for sympathy as a potent basis for ethical life. The description of Philip's feelings for Tom in this scene illustrates how sympathy works by showing the importance of imaginatively entering into the feelings of another person and prompting a desire for that person's well-being. This kind of sympathy reverses that described by Jaffe (2000), who argues that: "Victorian sympathy involves a spectator's (dread) fantasy of occupying another's social place" (8). Quite differently, the sympathy Philip manifests is based on his own experiences of suffering from a physical disability, but it is not self-interested. Rather, Philip moves from his own sufferings to an identification with Tom's feelings that involves a self-forgetfulness in the form of abandoning his previous negative feelings about Tom because of his greater interest in Tom's physical and emotional welfare.

That Philip's sympathy overcomes his self-interest (or "egoism," as George Eliot calls it) emerges most clearly in his final letter to Maggie. Like Lucy, he forgives Maggie for her betrayal with Stephen. Unlike Lucy, he is allowed to express this forgiveness fully, and in such a way that effaces the injury

he has suffered in his desire to mitigate Maggie's own suffering and remorse:  
“[i]n the midst of my egoism, I yet could not bear to come like a death-shadow  
across the feast of your joy” (503). Philip's sympathy, as expressed in the letter,  
is decidedly mutual, in that he articulates his belief that it has been produced by  
Maggie's own sympathy for him:

‘The new life I have found in caring for your joy and sorrow more than for  
what is directly my own, has transformed the spirit of rebellious  
murmuring into that willing endurance which is the birth of strong  
sympathy. I think nothing but such complete and intense love could have  
initiated me into that enlarged life which grows and grows by  
appropriating the life of others; for before, I was always dragged back  
from it by ever-present painful self-consciousness. I even think sometimes  
that this gift of transferred life which has come to me in loving you, may  
be a new power to me.’ (503)

Here, Philip gives Maggie the gift not only of his sympathy, but, also, that of  
recognizing hers. Again, George Eliot reinforces a view of sympathy that, unlike  
that described by Jaffe (2000), is mutual, and that gains power from this  
mutuality. In this letter, then, Philip expresses George Eliot's belief that  
sympathy is the basis for ethical relationships between individuals, and that  
community requires this kind of sympathy.<sup>74</sup>

With Philip, George Eliot explores not only the ethics of sympathy but,  
also, how that ethics is bound up with gender. Like that of *Adam Bede's* Seth,  
Philip's gender does not conform to Victorian normative masculinity. His  
physical disability prevents him from engaging in the active pursuits that

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<sup>74</sup> Philip's letter (502-504) as a whole offers excellent insight into George Eliot's  
vision of how an ethics of sympathy might work.

Victorian ideology associated with masculinity. Tosh (1999) discusses this, pointing out the “heavily physical slant” the Victorians came to give to masculinity (188), and Tom Tulliver represents this point of view, as when he tells Philip, “[y]ou know I won’t hit you, because you’re no better than a girl” (173). While Tom sees Philip’s femininity as a disadvantage, the narrator suggests that it contributes to sensitivity and sympathy. The narrator explicitly links Philip’s sensitivity with femininity, describing him as “by nature half feminine in sensitiveness” (331). Philip’s sensitivity to other people’s feelings is the basis of his sympathy, as discussed in his response to Tom’s accident. This is not without its drawbacks, as Philip’s letter calls attention to his own physical and psychic suffering, suggesting that selfishness compromises his sympathy. Thus, George Eliot acknowledges some of the problems inherent in making feeling the basis of ethics. Philip’s feminization, then, and its connection with his sympathy, makes up part of George Eliot’s hesitation in fully embracing sympathy as a viable basis for ethics. She re-affirms the link between sympathy and femininity that she establishes elsewhere, as in the association between Tom’s masculinity and his lack of sympathy, or Lucy’s femininity and her gentle sympathy for Maggie and others. By locating feminine sympathy in Philip, George Eliot questions the idea that men cannot be sympathetic or feminine, while upholding the Victorian ideology that associated sympathy with femininity.

## V. Conclusion

*The Mill on the Floss* grapples with the interrelated concerns of gender and sympathy. In this novel, George Eliot shows how normative femininity can be harnessed positively, as in the character of Lucy, because of the importance it places on sympathy. Yet, she is ultimately critical of gender binaries, because, as the character of Tom shows, normative masculinity represses and blocks sympathy. Furthermore, George Eliot's characterization of Philip Wakem reveals her belief in the possibility of male femininity, in which men might possess some of the positive traits—especially sympathy—that the Victorians associated with femininity. Because of the importance George Eliot placed on sympathy as the foundation of ethical life and the justification for art (especially the realist novel), the fact that she links failures of sympathy with the separation of spheres and gender normativity gives weight to her critique of Victorian gender ideology. That is to say that, for George Eliot, what is most dangerous about the restrictive nature of Victorian understandings of gender is the threat it holds for ethical life, in that it does not demand sympathy from all members of the community.

#### Chapter Four: *Middlemarch*

“If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> I chose this passage to head this chapter because I believe it captures the ambivalences that characterize George Eliot’s attitude toward peripheral characters. I agree with Alex Woloch (2003), who says that this passage

simultaneously registers the imperative to look at the masses of ‘ordinary life’ and anxiously worries that the sight might be too much. In its hostility and its sympathy toward the ordinary life that, by being silenced,

--- George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (194)

In the wide range of characters it includes, *Middlemarch* makes an ideal case study for a discussion of marginal characters. Like George Eliot's other novels, *Middlemarch* deals with the struggle to balance the needs of the individual with those of the community, and shows how these needs intersect, even when they appear to be at odds. As Elizabeth Langland (1995) and Suzanne Graver (1984) have argued, George Eliot saw individual growth as contributing to communal betterment.<sup>76</sup> Yet, while George Eliot's other novels tend to foreground the individual, *Middlemarch* focuses primarily on the community. *Middlemarch* both shows how the community as a whole inflects and shapes individual characters, and stresses that that community is comprised of individuals, and has no existence without individual subjects. Focusing on Celia Brooke and Camden Farebrother, I examine the seemingly contradictory ways in which *Middlemarch* prompts a re-thinking about peripheral characters, and the ways in which gendered discourses and the tensions between sympathetic and normative ethics inflect the treatment of these characters.

George Eliot, perhaps more than any other author, recognizes the difficult choice of a centre of consciousness in narrative, and this affects her portrayal of

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can only take the form of a roar, Eliot's passage captures the peculiar extremes of the realist imagination, caught between idealism and anxiety, between including and distorting minor characters, in the double pull of democracy and inequality. (32)

<sup>76</sup> Graver, for example, argues that George Eliot, "attempted to further community by encouraging changes of consciousness" (10).

peripheral characters. She acknowledges this in *Middlemarch* by having her narrator step back and question the novel's focus on Dorothea:

One morning, some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea—but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage? I protest against all our interest, at our effort at understanding being given to the young skins that look blooming in spite of trouble; for these too will get faded, and will know the older and more eating griefs which we are helping to neglect. In spite of the blinking eyes and white moles objectionable to Celia, and the want of muscular curve which was morally painful to Sir James, Mr Casaubon had an intense consciousness within him, and was spiritually a-hungred like the rest of us. (278)<sup>77</sup>

This is one of several instances in the text in which George Eliot's narrator reflects upon the novel's economy of sympathy, or, as Kornbluh (2010) puts it, one of the "moments in which the narrator steps beside the text to talk about the allocation of sympathy within it" (944).<sup>78</sup> Here, George Eliot acknowledges Casaubon's subjectivity and perspective, but she does so at the expense of two peripheral characters, Celia and Sir James, in pointing out the "blinking eyes and

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<sup>77</sup> This passage has received much discussion in *Middlemarch* criticism. The usual way of interpreting this passage is to refer to it as exemplary of George Eliot's attempts to broaden her readers' sympathies. Melissa Anne Raines (2011), for example, cites the question, "but why always Dorothea" as an example of George Eliot "attempting to elicit sympathy for someone other than her heroine" (66). George Levine (2001) uses this passage to illustrate George Eliot's art of realism, which acknowledges the multiple ways in which experience can be understood. He argues that this passage, "in its sudden radical shift of perspective [. . .] dramatically represents George Eliot's recognition that no single perspective can encompass reality" (15). Alex Woloch (2003) argues that it draws attention to the problem of asymmetry in characterization, and that it reveals George Eliot's belief that characterization "is a dynamic narrative process that can be actively interrogated, rather than simply taken for granted" (45). Other critics, including Barbara Hardy (2006) and Alexander Welsh (2001), have used this passage to illustrate George Eliot's ability to sympathetically describe the experiences and perspectives of male, as well as female, characters.

<sup>78</sup> Kornbluh uses the Greek term "parabasis" to refer to such moments.

white moles objectionable to Celia, and the want of muscular curve which was morally painful to Sir James.” Lack of interest in Casaubon’s perspective, she suggests, emerges from superficial attitudes, like those of Celia and Sir James, rather than from the constraints of the novelistic form.

In its ambitious struggle to widen the aesthetic and ethical scope of both the novel and the community of feeling, *Middlemarch* continues to advance George Eliot’s philosophy of sympathy. In particular, it expands on the problem of how to cultivate sympathetic ethics in a context that privileges economic understandings of sympathy. Graver (1984) argues that *Middlemarch* brings together “the ideal of sympathy and the challenge of discomfiting discovery” (295). In other words, this novel stages a confrontation of the ideal with the real, or of the ethics of sympathy with the economy of sympathy.<sup>79</sup> While George Eliot continues to explore—and promote—communities based on sympathy, she also increasingly acknowledges the difficulties of establishing and maintaining such communities in the context of inequalities, such as those of class and gender, which threaten to deform communities into economies. This chapter explores the gendering of the tensions between sympathetic ethics and economies by

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<sup>79</sup> Kornbluh (2010) amplifies Graver’s suggestion that *Middlemarch* brings uneasiness to bear upon the ethics of sympathy it promotes, but uses language more similar to mine, invoking George Eliot’s narrative economies. She argues that *Middlemarch* is “remarkable for the economic rhetoric employed by the narrator to deliberate sympathy” (944), and that it “can be seen mapping the attractions and dangers of the metaphor of the economy of sympathy” (944). Kornbluh argues that, although George Eliot’s “sympathetic ethics reject base economics, those ethics are imaged through economic forms” in *Middlemarch* (944-945).

examining the portrayal of two peripheral characters, Celia Brooke and Camden Farebrother.

By employing multiple and shifting representations of any one character, the narrative highlights the mutability of social subjects.<sup>80</sup> By presenting Celia, in particular, in this way, George Eliot shows the fragility of specifically feminine constructions of subjectivity. George Eliot's realist strategy of incorporating many voices and points of view coalesces with her stated aim of enlarging her readers' sympathies. While I would not dispute the claim that George Eliot does succeed in writing sympathetically and encouraging sympathetic reading, I am interested in how her representations of Celia and Farebrother affect both her claims for sympathy and her interrogation of the relationship between gender and sympathy.

In this chapter, I focus on Camden Farebrother and Celia Brooke. These two very different characters open up George Eliot's positions on gender and sympathy, and on the relationship between them. Both Farebrother and Celia define themselves primarily in and through sympathetic relationships to other people, although their sympathy manifests itself in very different ways, and is inflected by their respective gendered positions and performances of those positions. Both their gender and their sympathy come into being in relation to other people. Farebrother is a bachelor, but his relationships are key to his

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<sup>80</sup> As Graver (1984) puts it, in *Middlemarch* "the reader is required to feel and think from a number of different centers of self. This movement, in turn, mirrors and extends the multiple perspectives the narrator brings to the characters" (292).

character, and include those of son, brother, and friend, as well as of vicar and unsuccessful suitor. Celia, on the other hand, is much more obviously defined in relational terms, as sister, wife, and mother. In all of their interpersonal relationships, both Farebrother and Celia enact the sympathy on which George Eliot's social and ethical vision turns, and show how, in a patriarchal context governed by the doctrine of separate spheres, practicing sympathy becomes a gendered endeavour.

Farebrother's sympathy recalls that of Seth and Mr. Irwine in *Adam Bede*, and involves a willing surrender of self(-interest) to the good of the community. Farebrother suffers both professionally and romantically for his commitment to sympathy, but this does not seem to diminish his faith in it as the best basis for ethical living. While he desires extrinsic rewards—money and Mary Garth as a wife—Farebrother does not make these the locus of his striving or capacity for self-fulfillment. Rather, he embodies the possibility that fulfillment might be found in less tangible ways—specifically, in the cultivation of sympathetic relationships to other people and in the integrity that comes from remaining committed to putting one's ethical ideals into practice. In his sympathy with Lydgate, Farebrother sacrifices his own professional and financial interests, just as, later, in his sympathy with Fred Vincy, he will more decisively sacrifice his own romantic interests. Elizabeth Deeds Ermath (1994) points out that, while giving up Mary to Fred is a sacrifice for Farebrother, it allows Farebrother “to keep control of himself, literally to maintain his identity” (235-6). Like Seth's,

then, Farebrother's happiness does not come from extrinsic rewards, even though he desires them, but, rather, from moral consistency. With Farebrother, then, George Eliot presents a radical challenge to the economic view of sympathy by imagining how a commitment to sympathetic ethics might overcome obstacles and create not only richer communities but, also, a viable mode of self-fulfillment.

I also explore how the character Celia complicates the novel's treatment of normative femininity and the associated roles of wife and mother, and how this complicates *Middlemarch*'s position on relationships and sympathy. First, I examine how Celia functions to endorse normative ideas about marriage and motherhood. Celia's relationship with Sir James echoes Victorian stereotypes that imagined the wife's sympathy as a necessary ingredient in bourgeois marriage, while at the same time recuperating that which is ethically productive. I then look at how Celia's maternity and love for her son functions in a similar way, both seeming to bolster Victorian stereotypes about maternal self-sacrifice and maternity as the ultimate vocation for women, and becoming an important source of sympathy that does not remain confined to the maternal relationship. Instead, Celia relates sympathetically to Dorothea, and thus contributes to the greater good of the community. Finally, I discuss the importance of Celia's sisterly sympathy for Dorothea, and argue that this complicates the tendency to read Celia as a peripheral character because of the importance this sympathy assumes for the unfolding of *Middlemarch*'s plot.

Taken together, Celia and Farebrother show that, contra Jaffe (2010), *Middlemarch*'s plot is not one that "revolves around the inexorable influence of the mediocre middle on those who would distinguish themselves from it" (24). Peripheral characters in George Eliot are seldom, if ever, "mediocre." Even when they occupy minimal narrative space, they contribute significantly to the elaboration of the themes of sympathy and gender that are so central to George Eliot's literary and philosophical project. Farebrother shows how sympathy can produce a new kind of masculine subject who chooses the good of the community over personal rewards. Celia demonstrates how conventional femininity can be used in ethically productive ways when it nurtures sympathy and an understanding of the self as fundamentally and inescapably relational. In the sections that follow, I explore how, with the characters Celia and Farebrother, George Eliot expands the possibilities of sympathy, and what this means for understanding the gendered and communal subject.

#### I. Camden Farebrother

The vicar Mr. Farebrother embodies sympathetic ethics.<sup>81</sup> He represents George Eliot's sympathetic ideal, in that sympathy is his primary virtue and the force that guides and determines his relationship to other people, both as individuals and as members of the Middlemarch community. I agree with David Wayne Thomas, who argues in *Cultivating Victorians: Liberal Culture and the Aesthetic* (2004) that, although "Farebrother is a minor character in the scheme of Eliot's grand novel," he can be read as "stand[ing] just short of Dorothea Brooke as the figure most positively affirmed within that novel's moral vision" (8).<sup>82</sup> Farebrother's sympathy can be seen in his self-sacrificing generosity, which emerges in both his personal and his professional life. It contrasts with other ethical ideals (such as the more rigid brand of Christianity represented by Tyke and Bulstrode) in that Farebrother does not adhere to strict doctrines, preferring an affective relationship to others as the mainstay of his ethical life. That George Eliot approves of Farebrother and his sympathy is clear. Farebrother, then,

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<sup>81</sup> Even his name suggests this. As Gillian Beer (2006) observes, Farebrother's

name says much. He is entirely on the level of weak, steadfast humanity: a man of failings and foibles [. . .] but capable of loving self-sacrifice (his recognition that Mary loves Fred and that he should not press his own suit). Mr. Farebrother is fair and brotherly in an entirely human ethical dimension. (27)

<sup>82</sup> Thomas also argues that, "there is, between Dorothea Brooke and Farebrother, a kind of family resemblance in matters moral and ethical. Each character is heavily marked by qualities of tolerant judgment and respect" (15), and that, in fact, "Farebrother spends the entire novel occupying a generous, flexible, tolerant position of judgment that Dorothea has to attain to in the course of her experiences" (8).

represents both the highest potential of sympathetic ethics, and, also, the demands that such ethics place on the individual.

In the contest between Farebrother and Tyke, George Eliot illustrates the clash between sympathy and other bases for ethics. Farebrother's rejection of normative ethics, in the form of religious doctrine, divides the Middlemarch community. Mr. Bulstrode disapproves of him, while Mr. Vincy objects to another clergyman, Mr. Tyke, on the ground that his sermons "were all doctrine," and prefers Mr. Farebrother, "whose sermons were free from that taint" (156). Mr. Vincy is a more sympathetic character than Bulstrode, and his opinion here seems to be shared by the author. Farebrother recalls *Adam Bede's* clergyman Mr. Irwine, in that his strength as a moral and spiritual leader comes more from his generous sympathy than from a strict adherence to doctrine. Tyke is "apostolic" (495) and his sermons would be, as Dorothea observes to Lydgate, "of no use at Lowick," being all "about imputed righteousness and the prophecies in the Apocalypse" (495). Lydgate puts it more bluntly, telling Dorothea:

'I find that what is called being apostolic now, is an impatience of everything in which the parson doesn't cut the principal figure. I see something of that in Mr Tyke at the Hospital: a good deal of his doctrine is a sort of pinching hard to make people uncomfortably aware of him.'  
(495)

Farebrother, in contrast, Lydgate tells Dorothea, "is only a parson among parishioners whose lives he has to try and make better" (495). Farebrother's ethics, in other words, emerge in the ways in which he relates to and treats other

people, rather than in the eloquence or coherence of his sermons. Thus, George Eliot promotes the importance of ethics that come into being in everyday encounters between subjects, rather than ethics that can be articulated into a tidy system. Farebrother's ethics have a situational, even spontaneous quality, as they seem to arise from intuition, rather than from a set of established principles. This capaciousness, flexibility, and responsiveness give sympathetic ethics their strength, while at the same time making them somewhat elusive, which explains why many members of the Middlemarch community have difficulty in accepting Farebrother over the more conventional and strictly religious Tyke.

That Farebrother allows his sympathy to determine his professional life can best be seen in the way in which he allows Lydgate to vote against him, something that costs Farebrother financially. Farebrother's financial difficulties come from the fact that he supports his mother, maiden aunt and unmarried sister on his meager salary, which he supplements by playing whist. The salary accompanying the position of hospital chaplain would therefore help him both to support his family and to give up gambling. Yet, Farebrother's sympathy for Lydgate's predicament overrides his self-interest in the matter of the voting. Lydgate likes and respects Farebrother, but sees that voting for Tyke will advance his own career by aligning him with the wealthy and powerful Bulstrode. Suzy Anger (2001) summarizes this as "Lydgate's difficult public vote for Tyke, so ensuring patronage [from Bulstrode] for his much-needed hospital, over the more honorable and attractive Farebrother" (93); thus, like most critics of the

Farebrother-Tyke contest, Anger concentrates on Lydgate's personal struggle, rather than on the ethical and philosophical contrast between what Farebrother and Tyke themselves, respectively, represent. Seeing Lydgate's dilemma, Farebrother reassures him: "[b]ut then you must not offend your arsenic-man. You will not offend me, you know, [. . .] I don't translate my own convenience into other people's duties'" (175). Here, Farebrother invokes unsentimental language—that of offence, convenience, and duty—but shows an affective and generous response to Lydgate's difficulties. Farebrother acknowledges his own desire for the position and poor opinion of Bulstrode, but also reassures Lydgate that their friendship will not be affected should Lydgate choose to vote with Bulstrode and against him (as, after a struggle with his conscience, Lydgate ultimately does). In so doing, Farebrother chooses sympathy and the preservation of his friendship with Lydgate over professional advancement and material rewards. What makes this particularly remarkable is that, as he himself admits, Farebrother is not indifferent to such external rewards. Farebrother's sympathy, however, ultimately overrides these desires, proving its strength as the ground of his ethical system.

This sympathy determines Farebrother's romantic, as well as professional, life. The costs of sympathy are more obvious in this, because, while he eventually triumphs professionally, due to the intervention of Lydgate and Dorothea, who finally come to recognize the worth of his sympathy, he does not succeed romantically, or, at least, not in any tangible way. Farebrother shares with Fred

Vincy a love for and devotion to Mary Garth who, while she recognizes Farebrother's moral worthiness and "admired the keen-faced handsome little Vicar in his well-brushed threadbare clothes more than any man she had had the opportunity of knowing" (408),<sup>83</sup> loves and eventually marries the more flawed, and less morally admirable, Fred. Fred, at first oblivious to Farebrother's interest in Mary, enlists his help in courting her, something to which Farebrother reluctantly agrees, his sympathy for Fred ultimately overcoming his own self-interest, just as his sympathy for Lydgate did in the matter of the hospital chaplaincy. Graver (1984) refers to this incident as an example of "Farebrother's self-sacrificing intercession" (217). Farebrother suffers in doing this, and, Mary senses the "grave restrained emotion" (517) in his tone. He recognizes that, by helping Fred in this way, he has relinquished his own chances with Mary, and feels that he has "gone magnanimously through a duty much harder than the renunciation of whist, or even than the writing of penitential meditations" (518). Farebrother, then, is not utterly or reflexively altruistic. His sympathy involves

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<sup>83</sup> The passage continues:

[s]he had never heard him say a foolish thing, though she knew that he did unwise ones; and perhaps foolish sayings were more objectionable to her than any of Mr. Farebrother's unwise doings. At least, it was remarkable that the actual imperfections of the Vicar's clerical character never seemed to call forth the same scorn and dislike which she showed beforehand for the predicted imperfections of the clerical character sustained by Fred Vincy. These irregularities of judgment, I imagine, are found even in riper minds than Mary Garth's: our impartiality is kept for abstract merit and demerit, which none of us ever saw. Will any one guess towards which of those widely different men Mary had the peculiar woman's tenderness?—the one she was most inclined to be severe on, or the contrary? (408).

conscious and painful struggle against self-interest.<sup>84</sup> In Farebrother, then, George Eliot dramatizes the work of sympathy, and the degree to which the ethics of sympathy is a process.

Like Seth in *Adam Bede*, Farebrother is a male character who complicates stereotypes linking affect, especially sympathy, with femininity.<sup>85</sup> Both Farebrother and Seth are strong male characters—Seth is a carpenter, Farebrother supports his family and enjoys traditionally masculine pursuits and male companionship (his friendship with Lydgate, for example). Yet, both show the sympathy more often associated with women, something that Ablow (2007) has discussed in her analysis of the related functions of the Victorian novel and wife as providers of sustaining sympathy. Seth's and Farebrother's sympathy is not, then, inimical to their masculinity. However, it does exclude them from the masculine roles of husband and father, and this dramatizes the costs that sympathy exacts. Despite their sacrifices, however, both Seth and Farebrother seem, on the whole, content and fulfilled, and this suggests that sympathy and compromises made for the good of the community are as much, if not more, conducive to happiness and self-actualization than the pursuit or attainment of more tangible

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<sup>84</sup> Similarly, David Wayne Thomas (2004) argues that, "Farebrother epitomizes a specific vision of moral reflection: we see his inward voice, implying a self-addressable self; his bracketing of 'a strong disposition' to follow an emotionally pressing desire; and his determination to act according to what seems morally correct" (9).

<sup>85</sup> While I am suggesting that Farebrother's gender is not stereotypically masculine, I would not go so far as Janice Carlisle (2004), who argues that Farebrother is one of several "insubstantial men" in *Middlemarch* (154) who stands for "male impotence" (154).

rewards. Sympathy, then, allows one to move beyond the self, something which suggests not only an ethically productive expansion of self and renewal of the community as the site of ethics<sup>86</sup> but, also, a move that transcends the gendered discourses that depend on (over-)valuing gendered roles such as those of husband and father.

Although Farebrother is highly sympathetic, he is not an idealized character, at least not in the sense that he is utterly altruistic or self-forgetful.<sup>87</sup> Farebrother's flaws show his humanity, and his struggles with himself show the costs that sympathy exacts, while at the same time suggesting that those struggles are not only worthwhile but, also, a vital part of sympathy. This is because George Eliot imagines sympathy as a process that requires constant negotiation between the needs of the self and of the community, as well as between the desires of the ego and the demands of the conscience. Struggle, in other words, gives meaning to ethics in general and to sympathy in particular. Farebrother reflects, on abdicating his pursuit of Mary, “[t]o think of the part one little woman can play in the life of a man, so that to renounce her may be a very good imitation of heroism” (676). Unlike Seth in *Adam Bede*, who readily

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<sup>86</sup> The idea that community is the site of ethics has been promoted and explored by Charles Taylor throughout his career. He suggests, in *Hegel and Modern Society* (1979), for example, that, “what is most important for man can only be attained in relation to the public life of a community, not in the private self-definition of the alienated individual” (93).

<sup>87</sup> As Kathryn Hughes (1999) points out, likening Farebrother to *Adam Bede*'s Reverend Irwine, “Irwine may hunt and Farebrother play cards, much to the horror of their dissenting and Evangelical neighbours, but both extend a charity and understanding to their fellow men which was to become the corner-stone of Eliot's adult moral philosophy” (23).

relinquishes any claims on Dinah, or Lucy in *The Mill on the Floss*, who cannot bring herself to renounce Stephen for Maggie's sake, Farebrother struggles with his decision to give up his pursuit of Mary and yield to Fred. By portraying Farebrother, and sympathy, in this way, George Eliot shows that sympathy is a viable basis for ethics because it takes into account, perhaps even requires, constant struggle and negotiation between the ideal that she imagines and the real direction that she sees history as taking. Such struggle, in *Middlemarch*, takes place in the realm of the everyday, and George Eliot's realism thus incorporates idealism.

## II. Celia Brooke

### i. Sympathy and the Relational Self

Whereas Farebrother's sympathy ultimately excludes him from the reproductive economy—that is, from becoming a husband and father—Celia Brooke's sympathy emerges through her roles of wife, mother, and sister. Celia defines herself in terms of these gendered roles, and her sympathy, which is in many ways quite different in kind from Farebrother's, comes into being through these roles and the relationships by which they are defined. Relationships of all kinds are fundamental to George Eliot's ethics of sympathy. As Graver (1984) insists, “kinship ties [. . .] are everywhere in George Eliot's fiction the most

substantial of the pillars of community” (112). Celia models the ways in which sympathy became not only compatible with, but integral to, the ideology of normative femininity, in that her sympathy comes into being and meaning in the context of her fulfillment of idealized female roles. As Ablow (2007) has argued, the Victorian era saw the privatization and feminization of sympathy, and Celia illustrates the extent to which this was true.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, Celia’s sympathy is in many ways in line with George Eliot’s ethics, in that it, like Dorothea’s, is diffusive in its effects, rather than tied to specific ideological projects. As Graver argues,

[w]hile [. . .] [*Middlemarch*’s] Finale’s portrait of Will calls attention to national political reform, the farewell to Dorothea celebrates an individual’s private contribution to the growing good of the world. Given the structure of values George Eliot brings to the idea of moral evolution, Will’s concrete accomplishments can but take second place to Dorothea’s ‘incalculably diffusive effect.’ (223)

In other words, although George Eliot promotes social change, she believes more in the encouragement of sympathy than in endorsing specific political projects. Celia, like Dorothea, is aligned with this privatized and diffusive sympathy, a sympathy that, George Eliot shows, is essential to the transformation of society. Because Celia’s sympathy is of this privatized and diffusive kind, it seems less remarkable than Farebrother’s, but it is nonetheless ethically productive, and, like Farebrother’s, helps to solidify relationships and improve the lives of others. As I

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<sup>88</sup> Ablow argues that sympathy became increasingly associated with the private sphere, and that “its significance may have actually increased as it came to serve as a way to differentiate between public and private spheres, to define gender difference, and to defend the legal status quo regarding marriage” (3).

will discuss in this section, Celia's sympathy for her sister is integral to Dorothea's re-integration into the community, both after Casaubon's death and after her marriage to Will Ladislaw. Celia's sympathy, no less than Farebrother's or Dorothea's, then, plays an important role in solidifying the community and the relationships on which it is built, and must therefore be seen as utterly compatible with George Eliot's wider ethical vision, even while Celia herself remains a peripheral character, marginalized by the very ideology of femininity with which her sympathy is intertwined. While Celia's ability to act ethically is enabled and nurtured by the expectation that wives, mothers, and sisters be sympathetic, its scope is also limited by the other expectations attached to these roles, specifically the relegation of women to the private sphere.

Celia's marriage to Sir James has her adopting the conventional wifely role, but the sympathy that she brings to this role makes it ethically productive. Although Sir James initially wishes to marry Dorothea, her absorption with her plans and ideals prevents her from recognizing him as a suitor, or from sympathizing with him as an individual. Celia, by contrast, is more in sympathy with Sir James, and emerges as a more suitable partner for him. Although Sir James does continue, throughout the novel, to have a particular interest in Dorothea, his affection for Celia is carefully described as authentic. The narrator shows how this affection develops, by noting that since Sir James, learning that Celia is fond of him, had

the amiable vanity which knits us to those who are fond of us, and disinclines us to those who are indifferent, and also a good grateful nature,

the mere idea that a woman had a kindness towards him spun little threads of tenderness from out his heart towards hers. (62)

As this passage shows, Sir James gradually becomes attached to Celia because of the “kindness,” or sympathy, that he recognizes she holds for him. This is sympathy in two senses: Celia is sympathetic to Sir James’s unrequited pursuit of Dorothea, as well as to his character, with which she has more affinity than does Dorothea. With Celia and Sir James, then, George Eliot shows how sympathy can form the basis for relationships, and can give rise to other, more intimate, affective ties.

Celia’s sympathy with her husband seems, on one level, conventional, but their marriage seems to be one of equality, showing that sympathy is compatible with self-assertion. Although she may seem to be an avatar of stereotypical femininity in her ready embrace of marriage and motherhood, Celia is not a meek or oppressed wife. In fact, she sees herself as more independent than Dorothea, as she reveals when she tells her sister, ““I should not give up to James when I knew he was wrong, as you used to do to Mr Casaubon”” (736). Mary Poovey (1988) has discussed the ways in which the principle of coverture assumed that the interests of husband and wife were identical (51), and discusses how the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act and the debates surrounding it revealed the flaws in this logic, and Celia’s statement here illustrates her argument.<sup>89</sup> Sympathy for her

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<sup>89</sup> Poovey argues that the Act

was the first major piece of British legislation to focus attention on the anomalous position of married women under the law. This anomaly was

husband does not mean that she abandons her sense of self. Rather, because their marriage, unlike Dorothea's and Casaubon's, is founded on sympathy, Celia and Sir James can retain their individuality even within the context of the normative expectations of a Victorian wife and husband.

Celia and Sir James have one of the few successful marriages in the novel. Graver (1984) has discussed the many failed marriages in *Middlemarch*, and argues that the binary gender system is largely responsible for their failures. She points out, for example, that “no sooner do Lydgate and Rosamond appear as husband and wife than they begin to exhibit those disabilities endemic to the marital roles they unthinkingly play” (205), and that, “[w]hile Rosamond clearly plays a role in her husband's downfall, the wrong she does [. . .] clearly proceeds in part from her position as a woman” (208). Celia and James, in contrast, are more like Mary Garth and Fred Vincy, in that, for them, mutual love and sympathy overcome the constraining effects of the institutions of marriage and

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inherent in the common-law principle of coverture, which dictated that married women were legally represented or ‘covered’ by their husbands because the interests of husband and wife were assumed to be the same; as a consequence, married women were not ‘bound’ as individual subjects by contracts, debts, or some criminal laws. In addressing the issues of marital discord, separation, and divorce, debates about the Matrimonial Causes Bill called the public's attention to the paradoxical fact that in Britain, when a woman became what she was destined to be (a wife), she became ‘nonexistent’ in the eyes of the law. In focusing attention on this paradox, the debates therefore raised the possibility that married women's anomalous position would be questioned and even changed. That this did not happen suggests how reluctant lawmakers were to examine their assumptions about women, the relationship between the sexes, and the gender bias of British law. (51-52)

gender. This does not, Graver argues, undo George Eliot's critique of these institutions:

just as *Middlemarch* disputes the unifying force of any single system, so its critique of each system carries qualifications. In this case the 'limits of variation' include the Freds and Marys, but that they are content with their traditional roles does not mean others can be or should be. (217)

Like Fred and Mary's marriage, then, James and Celia's bolsters, rather than undermines, George Eliot's ethical position, which ultimately rests, not on the impulse to destroy social institutions, but on the need to approach the individuals within them with sympathy. In other words, George Eliot is not interested here in criticizing the institution of marriage itself but, rather, in showing both its limitations and its potential.

Celia also embraces the role of mother in what might seem like conventional ways, but she does so in a way that expands the range and depth of her sympathy. Whereas before the birth of her son Celia felt inferior to Dorothea, after it, she feels that she has the advantage over her sister, and the narrator gently mocks Celia's sense of superiority and its cause. Dorothea "meekly" asks Celia "[w]here am I wrong, Kitty?" and

was almost ready now to think Celia wiser than herself, and was really wondering with some fear what her wrong notion was. Celia felt her advantage, and was determined to use it. None of them knew Dodo as well as she did, or knew how to manage her. Since Celia's baby was born, she had had a new sense of her mental solidity and calm wisdom. It seemed clear that where there was a baby, things were right enough, and that error, in general, was a mere lack of that central poisoning force. (489)

While the tone here is gently satirical, there is perhaps some truth in Celia's belief that the baby has changed her—indeed, it would be implausible that it would not.

That Celia finds fulfillment in motherhood and does not see how one might be otherwise fulfilled perhaps marks her as a less sophisticated character than her sister, who has intellectual and altruistic ideals. Nevertheless, Celia's maternal role allows an expansion of her sympathy, and is therefore ethically productive.

Celia remains concerned about Dorothea as she cares for her baby, which suggests the non-exclusive nature of sympathetic relationships. Her maternity also seems connected to her capacity for sympathy, and Helena Michie (1992) has discussed the consistency with which Celia is aligned with maternity, which, she argues, aligns her with George Eliot's "own invocation of maternal tolerance toward the failings of her characters" (43). More than anyone else in the novel, Celia actively tends to Dorothea's well-being in concrete ways. In talking to Dorothea after Casaubon's death, "Celia was administering what she thought a sobering dose of fact. It was taking up notions that had done Dodo's health so much harm. So she went on in her neutral tone, as if she had been remarking on baby's robes" (490). Celia's attempts to comfort Dorothea may be misguided, and pragmatic rather than effusive, but they are undeniably genuine. Celia tells Dorothea her opinion of Casaubon's conduct in making his will:

'Mr Casaubon was spiteful. I never did like him, and James never did. I think the corners of his mouth were dreadfully spiteful. And now he has behaved in this way, I am sure religion does not require you to make yourself uncomfortable about him. If he has been taken away, that is a mercy, and you ought to be grateful. *We* should not grieve, should we, baby?' (491)

Although Celia shows here her devotion to her baby, she does not do so at the expense of comforting her sister, even if she cannot see that the baby may not be

as comforting to Dorothea as it is to herself. While critics including Rachel Ablow have shown the importance the Victorians and their novels placed on sympathy in marriage, particularly on the sympathy of the wife, George Eliot's portrayal of the relationship between Dorothea and Celia gestures to the importance of sympathy in other kinds of relationships. In showing how Celia nurtures both her baby and sister, George Eliot foregrounds the importance of sympathetic relationships that are diffusive and inclusive.

Celia succeeds in comforting Dorothea, and in creating a refuge for her in the wake of Casaubon's death. Dorothea herself acknowledges this. On not wishing to return to Lowick, she says: "I am much happier at Freshitt with Celia. I shall be able to think better about what should be done at Lowick by looking at it from a distance" (492), suggesting not only that Dorothea is overcoming her tragic (figurative) near-sightedness, but, also, that Celia is instrumental in helping her to do so. While Celia may not be able to sympathize with Dorothea intellectually, as Will does, she provides the feminine and familial comfort that are, at this point, much more helpful to Dorothea. Eventually, she draws Dorothea out of mourning. One of the ways in which she does this is symbolic. Celia is described as "throwing down her fan, and going to Dorothea. It was a pretty picture to see this little lady in white muslin unfastening the widow's cap from her more majestic sister, and tossing it on a chair" (548). Celia may not be as "majestic" as her sister, but she possesses the vivacity that Dorothea often lacks, and that is necessary to usher Dorothea out of grim widowhood. Removing

the cap does not only make Dorothea look as she did before her first marriage, it also represents a renewal of her personality. Celia notices this, and tells her sister, “‘Really, Dodo, taking your cap off made you like yourself again in more ways than one. You spoke up just as you used to do, when anything was said to displease you’” (550). Celia thus helps to renew Dorothea’s self-assertion, even though Dorothea’s sense of rectitude and outspokenness has often been inconvenient or grating to her.

In many ways, Celia is more perceptive than Dorothea, and perception is an important part of the sympathetic imagination. Even if her aversion to Casaubon is based on superficial judgments, Celia recognizes that he will make a poor husband for her sister. Similarly, Dorothea ignores the obvious clues that she is (at first) the object of Sir James’s affection, a mistake that Celia never makes. When the novel begins, Celia is much less “short-sighted” than Dorothea. While Celia may not always be able to understand her sister’s motivations (as in her reasons for marrying Casaubon), she has substantial insight into “Dodo”’s emotional life. While Dorothea persists, despite glaring evidence to the contrary, in believing that Sir James’s attentions to her are only as to a prospective sister-in-law, Celia has no such illusions. When Dorothea tells Celia that Sir James “‘thinks of me as a future sister—that is all’” (35), Celia begs her, “‘Pray do not make that mistake any longer, Dodo’” (36) and informs her that “[e]very one can see that Sir James is very much in love with you’” (36). Here, Celia may simply be, on the one hand, the mouthpiece of what “every one” knows, but she is unique

in seeing Dorothea's own misperception, and in being willing and able to undeceive her. She is also willing to antagonize Dorothea temporarily, because she is more interested in her sister's long-term well-being.

Celia's sympathy for Dorothea is possible both in spite and because of their many differences. While their similar upbringing and closeness as sisters provide a common ground, Celia's unique way of observing and interpreting both the world in general and Dorothea in particular also contributes to her ability to sympathize with Dorothea in ethically productive ways. Their differences contribute to this by affirming the individuality of each sister, and thus George Eliot allows for sympathy that does not undermine difference or subjectivity. Celia's difference from Dorothea is also important in ways similar to that of Seth's difference from Adam, in that they offer both a corrective and an alternative to Dorothea's moral and emotional intensity. The presence of Celia in the novel thus underscores the necessity of reading Dorothea and what she represents in the context of a community of other individuals.

Celia responds to Dorothea's announcement of her engagement to Will Ladislaw with uncharacteristic emotion. Although she starts by speaking "in her placid guttural, looking as prettily free from humours as possible" (820), soon "Celia's rare tears had got into her eyes, and the corners of her mouth were agitated" (821). The rarity of Celia's tears complicates the representation of her gender. Although Celia is depicted as conventionally feminine in many ways, excessive emotionality is not one of these. Indeed, Dorothea cries more often

than does her sister, a fact which, combined with the novel's emphasis on Dorothea's intelligence, disrupts the binary relationship often set up between reason and emotion, and, in the doctrine of separate spheres, also codified along gender lines.

Celia's importance is reinforced when the novel ends with the reunion of the two sisters, who had been kept apart by Sir James's aversion to Dorothea's second marriage, rather than by the birth of Dorothea's son. Celia's reaction to the news of this son influences her husband: "[s]uch being the bent of Celia's heart, it was inevitable that Sir James should consent to a reconciliation with Dorothea and her husband. Where women love each other, men learn to smother their mutual dislike" (837). This comment shows the power of emotion—which is here structured as feminine—over the normative values that underlie Sir James's dislike of Dorothea's second marriage. Thus, the structure of the novel ultimately confirms the importance of the sisters' relationship. Indeed, by ending the novel with the sisters' reunion, George Eliot structurally elevates their relationship above the marital relationships that have heretofore guided the trajectory of the novel. In this way, Celia becomes a key figure, in that her relationship with Dorothea reveals the superiority of affective bonds to normative strictures, as well as the importance of the web of relationships that give meaning to the life of the individual.

ii. Celia and Rosamond: Two Examples of Normative Femininity

Rosamond is introduced as another foil to Dorothea. While she is painted in a much less flattering light than Celia, she is also given more narrative space in which to develop. Probably for this reason, much more critical work has been done on Rosamond than on Celia, and Rosamond is certainly a provocative and challenging character providing much scope for this analysis. Marjorie Garson (2007) has pointed out that, “[a]s foil to Dorothea, Celia is soon eclipsed by Rosamond Vincy” (360). Similarly, Andrew H. Miller (1995) argues that, in relation to desire, “Dorothea is explicitly contrasted to her sister, Celia, and then, more fully to Rosamond Vincy” (196). As a foil to Dorothea, Rosamond is much more strongly contrasting than Celia, particularly because of the class distinctions that separate them. At the same time, the early contrast between Celia and Dorothea certainly anticipates the fuller opposition between Rosamond and Dorothea. The contrast between Celia and Rosamond suggests, among other things, the curious capaciousness of the ideology of femininity. It shows how this ideology can lead both to tragic failures, such as the marriage of Rosamond and Lydgate, and, conversely, how individuals can renovate it in ethically productive ways, as, I argue, does Celia.

If the characters in *The Mill on the Floss* were to be mapped onto those of *Middlemarch*, Lucy Deane might be divided into Celia Brooke and Rosamond Vincy. Structurally, Rosamond Vincy resembles Lucy as a potential obstacle to the heroine’s romantic fulfillment. However, Celia is much more like Lucy in

terms of temperament, as well as in the ways in which the narrator treats her. Celia, however, possesses something that Lucy does not: a sense of humour, and this helps to make her a more likeable character. Like Lucy, she is more stereotypically feminine than the heroine, and is presented as both less intellectual and less passionate. George Eliot's presentation of Celia, however, is in many ways subtler than her portrayal of Lucy, especially where she gestures toward similarities between Celia and Dorothea. Also, Dorothea and Celia's mutual love is portrayed more consistently throughout the novel than Maggie and Lucy's, and Celia's presence in the novel, though slight, is more consistent than Lucy's. In *Middlemarch*, then, George Eliot moves toward a more nuanced and sympathetic handling of the peripheral woman. This is also true in her treatment of Rosamond, which is far more complex than that of either Lucy or Celia, and shows George Eliot's continuing struggle to conciliate femininity and ethical behaviour. Rosamond herself is not a peripheral character from the perspective of the narrative as a whole, and this, together with the fact that *Middlemarch* concerns itself intimately with a fairly large cast of characters, suggests that George Eliot is attempting to widen the boundaries of narrative sympathy in order to be more inclusive. Celia, however, remains peripheral.

Celia may not be as intellectual as Dorothea, but she is not, like Rosamond, one of George Eliot's pretty, vapid foils to the heroine. Celia's intelligence, rather, is different in kind from her sister's. Her intelligence is less

abstract, more strategic, as we see in her response to Dorothea's preference for Casaubon:

It was Celia's private luxury to indulge in this dislike. She dared not confess it to her sister in any direct statement, for that would be laying herself open to a demonstration that she was somehow or other at war with all goodness. But on safe opportunities, she had an indirect mode of making her negative wisdom tell upon Dorothea, and calling her down from her rhapsodic mood by reminding her that people were staring, not listening. Celia was not impulsive: what she had to say could wait, and came from her always with the same quiet, staccato evenness. When people talked with energy and emphasis she watched their faces and features merely. She never could understand how well-bred persons consented to sing and open their mouths in the ridiculous manner requisite for that vocal exercise. (32)

This lack of impulsivity emerges as a virtue in the text, because, even if it is not labeled as such, Dorothea's and Rosamond's first marriages are impulsive, and their unhappiness can be linked to this original impulsivity. Yet, this passage remains rife with tensions indicative of the narrator's ambivalence toward Celia. The final lines perform a double mockery of the over-excited, hyperbolic figure and of Celia's dispassion and lack of feeling for art. Celia's distaste for singing is particularly suggestive, because singing and music are important and repeated tropes in George Eliot's writing, and she often associates them with the height of artistry.<sup>90</sup>

Like Celia, Rosamond is attracted to rank, but Rosamond's interest in it is much more acute, even obsessive. This might be explained by the fact that

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<sup>90</sup> See, for example, Delia da Sousa Correa's *George Eliot, Music and Victorian Culture* (2003), which explores George Eliot's use of allusions to music and its importance in Victorian culture. Also of interest is Beryl Gray's *George Eliot and Music* (1989).

neither Celia nor Dorothea are in a position to be anxious about wealth or status, because they are at the pinnacle of Middlemarch society, whereas Rosamond's class position is much less secure. While the narrator does show the social and familial conditions that influence Rosamond's social-climbing, it is nonetheless portrayed as one of her particular vices. This contrast between Rosamond and the Brooke sisters emerges when the narrator describes how, "[i]t was part of Rosamond's cleverness to discern very subtly the faintest aroma of rank, and once when she had seen the Miss Brookes accompanying their uncle at the country assizes, and seated among the aristocracy, she had envied them, notwithstanding their plain dress" (166). Rosamond recognizes, and envies, the social status of Dorothea and Celia, but, the narrator suggests, will never be able to possess their refinement, which knows that ostentatious dressing is not indicative of aristocratic connections. The novel's more sympathetic treatment of Celia, as compared to Rosamond, must be read in the context of class anxieties, and of the mutually constitutive relationship of class and gender norms.

Celia's replacement by Rosamond as foil to Dorothea suggests the importance of class in demarcating Dorothea as unique. As sisters, Celia and Dorothea occupy the same class. The difference between them is therefore based on intangible qualities, as Dorothea's comment to Celia in the jewel scene— "[s]ouls have complexions too: what will suit one will not suit another" (13)— exemplifies. If the differences between Celia and Dorothea are spiritual and intellectual, the contrast between Dorothea and Rosamond is material and social.

*Middlemarch*, in its contrast between Dorothea and Rosamond, uses class difference to occlude the oppressiveness of gender. Garson (2007) and Langland (1995) have discussed the deliberate contrast between Dorothea and Rosamond as a site in which gender and class anxieties interact, with Langland suggesting that George Eliot privileges gender over class (23), and Garson arguing that George Eliot uses the discourse of taste to differentiate Dorothea from Rosamond. I agree with Garson that Rosamond is consistently defined in terms of class and class anxieties: Garson argues that George Eliot depicts “with sociological precision the variants in the class that produced Rosamond” (339), and Rosamond’s goals (for example, her marriage to Lydgate and desire to cultivate relationships with his aristocratic relatives) all have to do with elevating her class position. When she replaces Celia as foil to Dorothea, then, gender is subordinated to class as a construction that limits women’s scope for ethical action.

Celia’s embrace of motherhood contrasts sharply with Rosamond’s careless and selfish choice that directly results in a miscarriage. While Celia is dismissed for being preoccupied with her baby at the expense of other interests, Rosamond is condemned as a bad mother. Her baby is born prematurely, a fact that can be directly linked to her obsession with wealth and status, because it results from her decision to go riding with Lydgate’s aristocratic cousin (581-5). Of Rosamond’s miscarriage, the narrator writes, “[t]his misfortune was attributed entirely to her having persisted in going out on horseback one day when her husband had desired her not to do so; but it must not be supposed that she had

shown temper on the occasion, or rudely told him that she would do as she liked” (581). Philip Fisher puts it bluntly in *Making Up Society: the Novels of George Eliot* (1981): “Rosamond commits the final sin against life when she takes a life, when she causes the miscarriage [. . .]. The little rituals of her social fantasy mean more to her, her conquests and airs are chosen over the baby’s life” (194). While Celia, and, later, Dorothea, find fulfillment in motherhood, Rosamond cannot see it as a route to happiness, at least not in comparison to the association with people of high social standing. For Celia, the maternal ideal associated with femininity seems to be a comfortable role, while, for Rosamond, the class-inflected ideal of femininity she strives to embody is incompatible with the idealized self-sacrificing mother, in that it privileges the performance of a social role over the work of sympathetic relationships.

That both Rosamond and Celia are associated with conventional femininity shows both its contradictions and its capaciousness. This also illuminates George Eliot’s carefully ambivalent relationship to conventional femininity. In Rosamond, George Eliot shows the dangers, both moral and practical, of aspiring to an idealized femininity that is defined against masculinity and therefore hampers sympathy between the sexes. Her portrayal of Celia, on the other hand, is more ambiguous, and seems to suggest a tentative acknowledgment that the virtues associated with femininity can be marshaled in the service of ethically productive sympathy, particularly in sisterly and maternal relationships. Celia’s thematic role in *Middlemarch*, then, can be read in relation

not only to Dorothea, but, also, to Rosamond. While Celia's methods of observation align her with a sympathy quite different from Dorothea's impassioned and ardent relationship to people and ideas, the ways in which she performs conventional femininity counter reductive readings of Rosamond as simply representing a condemnation of the feminine ideal.

Celia's function in the novel is much less obvious than is Rosamond's, as it has more to do with *Middlemarch's* thematic concerns than with the unfolding of the plot. In many ways, Celia might be likened to Seth Bede. Although dissimilar in terms of their characterization, both Celia and Seth consistently offer virtues that are necessary correctives to those of their siblings, who occupy much greater narrative space. Whereas Seth's gentleness and self-sacrificing sympathy balance Adam's hardness, Celia's keenness and common sense balance Dorothea's idealism, and her association with maternity and sexuality underscore Dorothea's denial of these things in her marriage to Casaubon. Celia, thus, serves in many ways as the necessary link between Dorothea's idealistic vision of sympathy and the application of sympathy in the real world. While Celia, as I have discussed, is often gently mocked by the narrator for her preoccupation with the material and the commonplace,<sup>91</sup> the material and the commonplace are by no means excluded from George Eliot's ethical imagination—in fact, the ethical is meaningless when it does not take these

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<sup>91</sup> Helena Michie (1992) points out that Celia's "interest in the body is betrayed in a variety of settings from her fondness for necklaces in the jewel scene, to her frank discussions of marriage and her preoccupation with Casaubon's mole and with the sounds he makes when chewing his food" (42).

things into account. Neither Celia nor Dorothea has a sufficient view of the world: it is only when combined with common-sense that idealism can do ethical work, and sympathy without ties such as those of maternal or sexual love can hardly be called sympathy at all.

### III. Conclusion

Although Farebrother and Celia may seem to have little in common—he is a bachelor, she is utterly defined by her roles as sister, wife, and mother—they both illustrate the importance of understanding ethics as relational, and show that sympathy is the proper basis for relational ethics. The importance of sympathetic ethics to the community becomes clear in the sacrifices Farebrother makes for Lydgate and Fred. By sacrificing his own concerns, both professional and personal, Farebrother reveals a belief in the importance of community over individual fulfillment, and a commitment to putting that belief into practice. Celia, too, shows the importance of relating sympathetically to other people, as she defines herself in and through sympathetic relationships. Farebrother's sacrifices only seem more remarkable than Celia's because hers are constructed as the natural expression of bourgeois femininity. With Celia, George Eliot shows that normative femininity need not be entirely dismissed, because the emphasis on sympathy and relationships it promotes have positive implications for communal life. This is not the end of her argument, however. With Farebrother, George

Eliot shows that sympathy need not, and should not, be relegated to women and the domestic sphere, but forms a viable basis for ethical life that is available to both men and women. Farebrother's sympathy differs from Seth Bede's in that it is more active: he deliberately acts in such a way as to further the interests of others, as in his intervention on Fred's behalf. It also differs from Philip Wakem's, which is less complete and even at times tinged with egoism. Both Celia and Farebrother may seem peripheral to Middlemarch the community, as well as to *Middlemarch* the novel, but the sympathetic values they represent, and the importance of these values to the community, are absolutely central to George Eliot's ethical ideal.

Chapter Five: *Daniel Deronda*

“There is a great deal of unmapped country within us which would have to be taken into account in an explanation of our gusts and storms.”

-- George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (235)

## I. Diffusing Sympathy

Sympathy and its objects are of particular relevance in *Daniel Deronda* (1876), a novel that, like *Middlemarch*, accommodates multiple central characters, and thus challenges conceptions of periphery and the place of the protagonist. *Daniel Deronda* follows the growth and development of multiple characters. This means that sympathizing with characters in *Daniel Deronda* is never a matter of straightforward identification with a protagonist, because this novel emphasizes the interrelatedness of lives. Specifically, *Daniel Deronda*'s multiple centres of interest create sympathy for a number of dissimilar characters (primarily Gwendolen and Daniel, but, also, the many other richly realized characters who populate this novel). This diffusiveness promotes the ethically productive—not to mention realistic—activity of sympathizing with disparate people and of separating sympathy from identification. In *Daniel Deronda*, then, perhaps more insistently than in any of George Eliot's other novels, sympathy becomes above all something that one does rather than (only) something that one feels. In this chapter, I discuss the sympathy of a number of peripheral female characters. My

analysis of these characters shows the imbrication of women's roles, especially those of mother and sister, with sympathetic ethics and sympathetic economies.

Ever since F. R. Leavis's famous condemnation of *Daniel Deronda*—he thought that the Jewish portion of the novel should be discarded<sup>92</sup>—the question as to who is the “real” protagonist of this novel has preoccupied critics. Leavis, for example, sees Gwendolen as the protagonist, and the sections on Daniel's uncovering of his identity as, therefore, peripheral and distracting. Such an approach, however, ignores one of the most compelling tensions within *Daniel Deronda*: the ways in which George Eliot unsettles conventions of periphery, protagonist, and sympathy. More recent critics have engaged with these tensions. Audrey Jaffe (2000), for example, argues that, rather than merging in sympathetic identification, “Deronda and Gwendolen continually miss each other, each using the other as a screen for his or her own concerns and anxieties” (147). She also emphasizes the extent to which Daniel's sympathy seems to feminize him (18). In this chapter, I build on such work, by acknowledging the complex interrelation of gender and sympathy in the novel, but focus my analysis on several peripheral

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<sup>92</sup> In *The Great Tradition* (1948), Leavis dismisses half of the novel, and re-names what he calls “the good part” of it “*Gwendolen Harleth*” (25). Of the “bad part” he says, “[a] distinguished mind and a noble nature are unquestionably present in the bad part of *Daniel Deronda*, but it *is* bad; and the nobility, generosity, and moral idealism are at the same time modes of self-indulgence” (100). Leavis's dismissal of the part of the novel that focuses on Daniel, rather than on Gwendolen, is not rooted in anti-semitism so much as in a troublingly essentialist view of gender: Daniel, he argues is “decidedly [. . .] a woman's creation” (100). Having spent five pages on the “bad” part of *Daniel Deronda*, Leavis ends by saying, “[n]o more need be said about the weak and bad side of *Daniel Deronda*” (103), and gives George Eliot the dubious compliment of saying that she transcends this “weak[ness] and bad[ness]” in the other part of the novel.

characters, showing how the intersection of gender and sympathy in them contributes to George Eliot's working out of the relationship between femininity, affect, and ethics.

*Daniel Deronda* troubles concepts of periphery and sympathy along the axis of gender. While Gwendolen is at first absolutely central, she becomes marginalized within the novel, which Daniel Deronda eventually usurps. Some critics have even argued that Daniel himself is the central feminine character: George Levine (2001), for example, argues that Daniel's story "is for the most part gendered female" (62) and invokes Leslie Fiedler's remarks that "Deronda is one of the most impressive heroines in English fiction" (62).<sup>93</sup> This does not mean that Gwendolen is a peripheral character in the way that Celia and Lucy are. Indeed, she constructs herself against other characters, including her sisters and Catherine Arrowpoint, only to eventually realize that her own centrality is a psychological illusion. As Levine (2001) writes, Gwendolen "must learn from Daniel himself the lessons of resignation that he, in effect, must unlearn [. . .] Gwendolen is left to make what she can of the crushing defeat of her egoistic ambitions and the virtual destruction of her sense of herself" (17). If Daniel and Gwendolen occupy ambiguous gender positions, however, they are not the only characters in the novel to provoke re-thinkings of Victorian problems of gender. While Gwendolen and Daniel gradually shift as centres of interest in the novel, a

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<sup>93</sup> Similarly, Amanda Anderson (2001) argues that, "[b]oth Deronda and Mordecai are feminized so as to interfuse their intellectual quests with dimensions of romantic and familial love" (139).

multitude of other characters also emerge to comment on or advance the concerns of their intersecting stories. To speak of peripheral characters in *Daniel Deronda*, then, presents challenges that are distinct from those in the other novels studied here. This difficulty, however, is productive, in that it focuses concentration on the problems of characterization and sympathy in the case of peripheral female characters.

In *Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot explores new meanings of marginalization and periphery, specifically, how these play out for all female characters, and by extension all women, rather than simply those women who do not fit into normative roles. Sympathy in *Daniel Deronda*, therefore, explicitly engages its imbrication with gender norms. Kate Flint (2001) has pointed out that this novel revises female stereotyping, especially in emphasizing Daniel's sympathy and Gwendolen's lack thereof (179). She suggests that, "[t]he idea that sympathy can actually have its limitations is addressed, and it is linked to the question of gender [in *Daniel Deronda*]" (176), an argument I wish to pursue in more detail in this chapter. Similarly, Audrey Jaffe (2000) argues that Daniel appears to be feminized precisely because of his sympathetic receptivity (18), and explores the limitations of his sympathy for both his mother and for Gwendolen.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Jaffe challenges readings of Daniel as an ideally sympathetic figure, and argues that he "not only fails to save Gwendolen Harleth but also fails to sympathize with her as well" (131). She argues that,

in interview after interview with Gwendolen and his mother, he appears awkward, stiff, and unable to speak—unable, despite his own and Eliot's protestations to the contrary, to sympathize. Scenes of sympathy in

Elizabeth Jean Sabiston (2008) also reads Daniel and his sympathy as problematizing normative gender, and suggests that he is an androgynous figure, not in terms of his sexuality, but, rather, “in both intellectual concerns and emotional responses” (156). I suggest that the revision of the stereotype in which sympathy is linked with femininity also emerges in the portrayal of more peripheral characters. Margaret Bruzelius (2007) has suggested that *Daniel Deronda* is filled “with specters, the female victims of patriarchal narrative,” amongst whom she includes Alcharisi and Mrs. Davilow, amongst others (172).<sup>95</sup> In this novel, George Eliot seems particularly interested in sympathy (and its lack) for women in relation to the roles of mother, sister, and daughter. In *Daniel Deronda*, characters tend to be marginalized through these roles and relationships. At the same time, the characters that fill these roles contribute substantially to the novel’s meditations on gender and sympathy.

This chapter focuses on four mothers—Mrs. Davilow, Alcharisi, Lydia Glasher, and Mrs. Meyrick—and two groups of sisters—Gwendolen’s half-sisters and the Meyrick girls. These peripheral mothers and daughters function as both objects of other characters’ sympathy (or lack thereof) and, also, as sympathetic subjects, either by embracing an ethics of sympathy, as the Meyrick women do, or

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this novel record not *Deronda*’s emotional receptivity or effective counseling but rather *Deronda* as a horrified and helpless spectator to situations and individuals beyond his control, stiffly delivering moral precepts that bear more on his own situation than on anyone else’s. (143)

<sup>95</sup> In some ways, Bruzelius’s identification of these “specters” aligns with my attention to peripheral characters. However, her treatment of them—she describes, for example, “the stupid Lady Mallinger” (172)—suggests that they do not enter into the economy of sympathy.

by navigating a sympathetic economy, as Lydia Glasher and Alcharisi do. With her idealistic depictions of the Meyricks and their home, George Eliot imagines the ways in which the domestic sphere might become a nexus of sympathetic ethics. Yet, with Mrs. Davilow, Lydia Glasher and Alcharisi, she shows the danger of making an absolute correlation between domesticity and sympathy, in that, for these women, sympathy is essentially economic, and their connection to the domestic is a tenuous one, sustained only by their abilities to navigate an economy of sympathy by inciting the sympathetic emotions of others, something they do with varying degrees of success.

## II. The Mother as Other

Both mothers and motherhood in *Daniel Deronda* are peripheral, and the narrative sympathy towards both individual mothers and towards the role that they do (or, in the case of Alcharisi do not) fulfill is profoundly ambivalent. In this section I discuss Alcharisi, Mrs. Davilow, Lydia Glasher, and Mrs. Meyrick, and reflect on what their characterization suggests about the institution of motherhood and of the lived realities of mothers. Although these are all peripheral characters, they are vividly drawn and bring to the novel an exploration of motherhood that is not peripheral to the novel's—and George Eliot's—larger preoccupation with gender and, in particular, the limitations attached to femininity. In *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud* (1998), Carolyn Dever explores the ways in which

“maternal space” in *Daniel Deronda* becomes “a proving ground for the terrors and pleasures of the feminine” (144), and shows how George Eliot uses elements of the Gothic to challenge the domestic ideal.<sup>96</sup> Thus, Dever gestures to the ways in which *Daniel Deronda* grounds its critique of normative gender in the language of emotions, with which sympathy is, necessarily, intimately involved. Sabiston (2008) also emphasizes the importance of mothers in *Daniel Deronda*, and points out that “[t]here is a quest motif in the novel, a quest for the mother, and sometimes the father” (157). This suggests that, although the mothers themselves in *Daniel Deronda* are more or less peripheral characters, their roles within the novel’s plot, as well as its thematic concerns, are central. They need not even be present in the text to exert this influence. Amanda Anderson (2001), for example, argues that “[t]he ground of Mirah’s goodness is her own loving mother” (139).<sup>97</sup> Similarly, Gillian Beer observes in *Darwin’s Plots* (1983) that, for several of the major characters in *Daniel Deronda*, “the mother is the well-spring of emotion” (194). While Beer does not pursue this provocative statement, I hope to explore it in some detail here. Specifically, this section explores the relationship between

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<sup>96</sup> Dever suggests that George Eliot “deploys Gothic tropes to problematize conventional borderlines of gender identity and desires,” and that, “male and female characters in *Daniel Deronda* cross and oppose one another in a chiasmic pattern: the women embrace Gothic horror as portending the truth of their domestic lives, while the men attempt to domesticate the Gothic, containing horror and uncanniness within the parameters of a domestic ideal” (144).

<sup>97</sup> Mirah’s “distinctively unreflective bond” to her mother, Anderson argues, is central to the “cultural affirmation associated with *Deronda*” (139), and represents what *Deronda* (and the novel) “comes to recognize and avow: the importance of a deeply felt connection to family and culture,” which underlies “the spiritual mission of Mordecai and Daniel” (139).

the mother as a source and object of sympathy, and how that connects with her marginality, both as a mother and as a peripheral character in *Daniel Deronda*.

The mother in *Daniel Deronda* is not a single, hegemonic figure:<sup>98</sup> rather, in its inclusion of several different maternal figures, this novel fractures the idealized Victorian conception of the mother, by rejecting the idea that motherhood can be contained within a single image or stereotype.<sup>99</sup> For instance, Alcharisi's public career challenges the confinement of the mother to the private sphere, a confinement that, as Nancy Armstrong (1987) has shown, served among other things, to consolidate middle-class power.<sup>100</sup> Yet, in other, perhaps more subtle, ways, Lydia Glasher, Mrs. Davilow and Mrs. Meyrick also suggest failures in the privatization of motherhood. The mothers I discuss in this chapter are in many ways explicitly contrasting characters. In broad terms, Alcharisi represents the woman who rejects motherhood, Mrs. Davilow the ineffective—even damaging—mother, Lydia Glasher both the rejecting mother (she abandons her first child) and the fiercely protective mother, while Mrs. Meyrick seems to be a model of sympathetic motherhood. Due to the complexity of George Eliot's characterization and moral thought, however, these characters cannot be so easily

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<sup>98</sup> George Eliot's earlier novels also offer complex and varied depictions of motherhood. Compare, for example Mrs. Poyser and Lisbeth in *Adam Bede*.

<sup>99</sup> In "Demonic Mothers: Ideologies of Bourgeois Motherhood in the Mid-Victorian Era" (1992), Sally Shuttleworth argues that, due to the competing roles implied in motherhood, the Victorian maternal ideal was "a field of potent conflicts in itself" (31).

<sup>100</sup> Similarly, Kathryn Hughes (2001) points out that the Victorian ideal of motherhood "depended on the assumption that a woman took no part in the market economy but was confined and defined by her place in the domestic sphere" (56).

dismissed. All four showcase some of the ambivalence that seems inseparable from motherhood, and they all adopt strategies to navigate the role of mother, from which they—even, in some important ways, Alcharisi, who seems to reject it—cannot escape. At the same time, because these characters remain peripheral, George Eliot can use them to raise questions about the mother as both subject and object of sympathy.

i. Mrs. Davilow

Gwendolen's mother, Mrs. Davilow, is in many ways the archetypal peripheral female character. She is reminiscent of Lisbeth Bede in her emotionality and her self-abnegation in favour of her children. In this way, she anticipates Freud's mother-as-other.<sup>101</sup> However, what makes her different from both Lisbeth and the Freudian mother is that, in Lisbeth's case as in the Freudian model, the child-subject is male, while Mrs. Davilow's children are all female. Gillian Beer (1983) points out that "[t]he troubles of Gwendolen's mother, similarly, come from having a family of daughters whose only hope of salvation is to marry well" (187), and links this to her discussion of the problem in the novel of insisting on descent through the male line. This leaves Mrs. Davilow, like Mrs. Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), in a doubly marginalized role. That is, she is still expected to efface herself in the interests of

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<sup>101</sup> That is, the theory that the mother is the first "other" the self encounters, and therefore becomes and remains the archetypal Other.

her children, but can nevertheless never be seen as a fully successful mother in that she has not produced male offspring. In this way she is similar to Lady Mallinger, whose lack of a son who would be Sir Hugo's heir is a source of great regret. The lack of a son is important for the formation of Gwendolen's character, in that, as the eldest daughter, and her mother's favourite, she feels some obligation to restore her family's fortunes. Mrs. Davilow's preferential treatment of Gwendolen, furthermore, goes a long way to creating Gwendolen's sense of superiority and inability to sympathize with others. Mrs. Davilow, thus, and as Gillian Beer has suggested in a more general way,<sup>102</sup> is the source of sympathy, or, rather, of its lack, in the novel's protagonist.

Mrs. Davilow's attachment to Gwendolen is portrayed as unhealthy and detrimental to her daughter's moral growth. In Gwendolen, Mrs. Davilow has created a substitute for spousal affection, and also for her own fantasies of escape from a narrow life. Mrs. Davilow both creates and accepts Gwendolen's sense of superiority. Deirdre David (1981) has argued that Gwendolen's development is arrested in the state of narcissistic mother-love, and in this she reflects the critical consensus that Gwendolen's narcissism is largely a result of her mother's influence.<sup>103</sup> On viewing the cottage to which they are banished through financial

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<sup>102</sup> Here I refer to Beer's (1989) comment that, in *Daniel Deronda*, "[t]he figure of the mother becomes the predominant source of emotion [. . .]. Gwendolen's mother is her only emotional concern beyond herself" (130).

<sup>103</sup> Several psychoanalytic and feminist critics have addressed Gwendolen's attachment to her mother, which they tend to read as problematic. Peggy Fitzhugh Johnstone (1997), for one, concurs with David, although she uses the vocabulary provided by the self-psychology of Heinz Kohut, to argue that,

ruin, for example, Mrs. Davilow is above all anxious that Gwendolen approve of it: “Mrs Davilow’s worn beauty seemed the more pathetic for the look of entire appeal which she cast at Gwendolen, who was glancing round the house, the landscape, and the entrance hall with an air of rapid judgment” (19). Mrs Davilow then asks Gwendolen’s opinion of the place “in a gentle deprecatory tone” (19). Mrs Davilow, then, unlike, say, Mrs Meyrick, never assumes the position of head of the household, leaving that role, rather, to Gwendolen, with tragic results. In this way, she seems to embody Victorian anxieties about motherhood, and about woman’s ability to manage the family on her own.

As problematic as Mrs. Davilow and Gwendolen’s relationship is, in that it leads Gwendolen to have a false idea of her own claims and those of others, it is not an entirely negative one. Vrettos (1995) challenges this idea, arguing that when Daniel leaves Gwendolen to Mrs. Davilow’s care, their close relationship “bears only slight promise of renewal” (78). How one interprets this, however, depends on how one sees the ending, in which Gwendolen’s fate is left open. Dever (1998), in contrast to Vrettos, argues that Gwendolen’s mother is an “animating influence” on her, who plays a “liberating role later in the novel, when Gwendolen returns to her a widow, shattered by her nightmare marriage, determined to resurrect herself” (166). No matter how one reads the ending, their

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“Gwendolen’s overattachment to her mother amounts to a developmental arrest; she is unable to move toward the stage of adult female sexuality in which she can experience mature love” (168). Similarly, Nancy Nystul (1983), in her Kleinian analysis of Gwendolen, argues that her relationship to her mother is excessively close (47).

emotional bond remains strong throughout the novel, and, as Gwendolen's sympathy develops, it becomes clear that her mother's love has contributed to it. Gwendolen's love for her mother, and sense of her mother's love for her, is, like Daniel, something to which she clings amidst the sufferings of her marriage. That her mother's financial well-being has been secured becomes the only comforting outcome of her marriage for Gwendolen, who, although "[h]er heart was swelling, and she was ready to cry," she reminds herself that "[h]er mother *must* have been worse off, if it had not been for Grandcourt" (472). In the end, it is Gwendolen's mother, not Daniel, who stays to comfort her, and their growing mutual sympathy remains the one thing that holds out promise for Gwendolen's moral and emotional growth. Elizabeth Deeds Ermath (1997) sees this as central to the novel's grappling with the place and role of women, arguing that, when Gwendolen and her mother are reunited after Grandcourt's death, "[t]hat's where the woman's issue rests in this novel, in the failed but mending relation between mother and daughter" (201).<sup>104</sup> While Gwendolen's suffering, and her relationship with Daniel, are the more immediate catalysts of her emotional growth, her love for her mother, although it may have been founded originally on

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<sup>104</sup> This is not to say that Deeds reads the relationship between Gwendolen and her mother as unproblematic; on the contrary, she points out that Mrs. Davilow was "the woman who allowed her [Gwendolen] to accept the nearly fatal terms of the marriage market and who did not encourage her to develop a will and identity of her own" (201). Nonetheless, Deeds argues, for Gwendolen "[t]o overcome her isolation and to begin again" depends "on the outcome of the renegotiated relation between Gwendolen and her mother" (201).

selfishness, has given her a capacity—however latent—for the love that sympathy requires.

ii. Alcharisi

Alcharisi, or the Princess Leonora Halm-Eberstein, Daniel Deronda's mother, challenges the stereotype that naturalizes motherhood and associates it with a particular kind of sympathy.<sup>105</sup> She also troubles the novel's idealization of Daniel's own sympathy.<sup>106</sup> Catherine Gallagher (2006) argues that meeting Alcharisi forces Daniel to confront not only his kinship with her, and, therefore, his Jewish identity, but also the fact that "his absence, rather than his sympathetic presence, has been the condition of her success" (150).<sup>107</sup> Whereas Daniel's diffusive sympathy has, until this point, been the keystone of his character, the revelation of his Jewish identity creates a channel for that sympathy,<sup>108</sup> a channel

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<sup>105</sup> Graver (1984) points out that "the portrait of the Princess undermines the primary pillar of community—the family" (242).

<sup>106</sup> And, Anderson (2001) suggests, of George Eliot's own sympathy: "Leonora [. . .] redefines a central term in Eliot's ethic of sympathy and duty, introducing a form of *care* that, eschewing community, takes the widest personal freedom, and the least circumscribed world, for its object" (141). In fact, Anderson argues, Alcharisi not only redefines Eliotian sympathy, but shows the limits of George Eliot's authorial sympathy (which, as I have been arguing, peripheral characters often do): Leonora's "grave repudiation of feminine and maternal devotion," as well as her theatrical detachment, "dictates the limits of Eliot's sympathy for her" (141).

<sup>107</sup> Similarly, Anderson (2001) argues that, "[i]n a crucial way, and despite his own struggle to sympathize, Leonora's story fails to reach Daniel" (142).

<sup>108</sup> For a discussion of the ways in which Daniel's discovery of his Jewish identity focuses—or narrows—his sympathy, see Jaffe (2000). She argues that Daniel's

that becomes all the more needful as he realizes that his sympathy is not necessarily desired by his mother, on whom he would like to bestow it. Meeting Alcharisi, then, forces Daniel to re-think not only his cultural and religious identity but, also, and just as importantly, his ethical and affective way of understanding and relating to the world and other people. As David Marshall (1986) notes, Daniel's encounters with his mother teach him about "the limits as well as the risks of sympathy" (215). These encounters highlight the ways in which Daniel's own sympathy is hampered by his investment in patriarchy.<sup>109</sup> In this way, Alcharisi not only subverts the novel's discourses on femininity and Jewishness, but, also, on sympathy, and the ways in which gendered cultural and religious discourses inflect it.<sup>110</sup>

Alcharisi's physical appearance undermines Daniel's desire to use sympathy as a way of interpreting her. This corresponds to her insistence on telling her own story, in that it rejects interpretations that use sympathy to fix her subjectivity. Alcharisi's very physicality eludes easy interpretation: "her face [was] so mobile that the next moment she might look like a different person. For even while she was examining him [Daniel] there was a play of the brow and

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discovery of his Jewishness redefines sympathy, making it something that eradicates, rather than bridges, difference, in that his sympathy with the Jews turns out to be sympathy with himself as a member of the culture.

<sup>109</sup> Rosemarie Bodenheimer (1996) suggests that Daniel is "caught in the patriarchal myth of motherhood" and therefore cannot, "for all his sympathy understand or condone her [Alcharisi's] failure to love him" (187).

<sup>110</sup> As Anderson (2001) argues, "Leonora's gender is crucial in heightening the threat that she represents, because for Eliot, femininity in its ideal form enacts and transmits the affective bonds of the community, from the level of the family to that of the nation" (139).

nostril which made a tacit language” (535).<sup>111</sup> While this can be read as partly a result of her career on the stage, in which she has been used to assuming different personas, it also allows her to manipulate the way in which Daniel interprets her. Lynn M. Voskuil (2004) suggests that Alcharisi’s self-command “makes every space her stage, commanding rather than submitting to the cultural circumstances in which she finds herself,” and argues that, “her potent, subtle blend of theatricality and authenticity is depicted in stark contrast to Gwendolen’s contrived posing” (135).<sup>112</sup> Alcharisi resists interpretation, and, within the novel, she insists on controlling the ways in which others read her. Rather than appearing as a blank canvas on which Daniel might inscribe his fantasies and anxieties, Alcharisi controls the way in which he can interpret her. She tells him, “I am your mother. But you can have no love for me” (536), thus acknowledging that she has abandoned her maternal role;<sup>113</sup> she also refuses to let Daniel be the first to say so. As she tells Daniel, she does not expect him to love her, and does not ask anything of him. Rather, she has summoned him in order that she might tell her story. Thus, Alcharisi becomes representative of the right of everyone to tell his or her own story, a right that is sacrosanct in the world of

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<sup>111</sup> Valman (2011) argues that, “[f]ostered, paradoxically, by the constraint of patriarchal law, Alcharisi’s capacity for deliberate self-representation became the basis of her dramatic brilliance” (161).

<sup>112</sup> Alcharisi’s theatricality also positions her in contrast to Daniel. Anderson (2001) argues that, “[w]here Daniel cultivates the habit of ‘[seeing] things as they probably appeared to others,’ Leonora cares only to ‘represent’ dramatically, and for herself, all that she can. Daniel brings his detachment to the service of an ethics, Leonora to the service of an aesthetics” (141).

<sup>113</sup> At least in relation to Daniel; Alcharisi later has five children with the Prince Halm-Eberstein.

George Eliot. By uniting these various threads in one powerful character, George Eliot illustrates the connections between womanhood, periphery, and sympathy.

By telling Daniel the story of her life and explaining her choices, Alcharisi not only claims speech as a right but, also, as a way of repaying a debt or compensating a wrong. She expresses this to Daniel: “[i]f I tell everything—if I deliver up everything—what else can be demanded of me?” (547). She tells Daniel that she has nothing to give (543), but, in giving him her story, she bestows on him his Jewish identity, which will allow him not only to marry the woman he loves, Mirah, but, also, to embrace a vocation. Alcharisi’s speech, thus, both offers her some relief from her guilt and restores Daniel’s cultural heritage to him. While Alcharisi rejects Daniel’s sympathy for herself, her revelations to him help to enrich his sympathy for others by giving it direction. Whereas Daniel wishes to sympathize with his mother, she makes it clear that she neither needs nor wants this sympathy. Yet, in revealing to him his Jewishness, she gives Daniel both a wider scope for his sympathy and a channel into which he can use it to shape his own life and help others. Alcharisi’s speech thus seems to remove her from the economy and ethics of sympathy while also sanctioning and enabling Daniel’s own investment in them.

Alcharisi’s defence of her choice of a career over motherhood is as impassioned and intense as it is startling, given its context in a mid-Victorian novel. Many critics agree that Alcharisi demands to be read in the context of the

two central female characters, Gwendolen and Mirah.<sup>114</sup> Therefore, Alcharisi comes into the novel at least in part to offer an alternative to conventional femininity. She tells Daniel, ““Every woman is supposed to have the same set of motives, or else to be a monster. I am not a monster, but I have not felt exactly what other women feel—or say they feel, for fear of being thought unlike others” (539). Here, George Eliot argues not only that maternal feeling is as much a social convention as anything else, but, also, that individuality and difference should not exclude one from the community of sympathy her novels envisage and create. In this way, she makes a fervent proto-feminism not only compatible with, but, also, inseparable from, her ethics of sympathy. This also underlines the importance of separating sympathetic ethics, in which sympathy is freely given, from sympathetic economies, in which the distribution of sympathy is governed by social conventions, especially those of gender.

In explaining her decision to reject motherhood in order to devote herself to her career as a singer, Alcharisi takes an aesthetic stance that contrasts with George Eliot’s own. She adopts for herself the persona of the solitary artistic

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<sup>114</sup> For example, Nadia Valman (2007) suggests that George Eliot “counterposes the hubristic ambitions of Alcharisi against the self-abnegating feminine and patriotic devotion of Mirah” (171). Catherine Gallagher (2008), meanwhile, sees Alcharisi’s story and fate as commenting on Gwendolen’s, and has traced the parallels between the two characters. In contrast, Adela Pinch (2010) suggests the ways in which Alcharisi might be read as the inverse of Gwendolen, because of the latter’s acute sense of remorse, which contrasts with the former’s lack of emotional accountability.

genius, a figure usually gendered male.<sup>115</sup> Alcharisi's success has depended on her gradual escape from the claims of others, notably her father and son, which she experiences as bondage. This differs from George Eliot's aesthetic project, which is concerned with the representation and creation of communities based on sympathy. Alcharisi tells Daniel that "[w]e only consent to what we love" (541). Her rejection of the roles of daughter and mother is not, then, necessarily a rejection of sympathy but, in fact, a rejection of bonds that masquerade as sympathetic relations. In other words, Alcharisi rejects the economy of sympathy that makes sympathy mandatory, especially for women. Alcharisi's aesthetic vision embraces the Romantic ideal of the solitary genius, in contrast to George Eliot's more communitarian and socially responsive vision. Yet, in emphasizing that relationships without sympathy are little more than bondage, Alcharisi's speeches to Daniel contribute to George Eliot's ethical vision, in that they show the importance of sympathy in the creation of meaningful communities and human relationships. Furthermore, Alcharisi's perspective allows George Eliot to acknowledge that normative gender ideology often hampers sympathetic ethics, by making sympathy a requirement of femininity rather than an expression of a spontaneous and deeply felt ethical responsiveness.

Alcharisi's proto-feminist speech is not limited to the conflict between motherhood and career, but is much more far-reaching, having to do with the ways in which culture and gender inflect each other, as well as with the limits of

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<sup>115</sup> The solitary artistic genius was a figure particularly celebrated and cultivated by the Romantics.

sympathy. As Reina Lewis (1996) has shown, Alcharisi's critique of the constraints placed upon women shows an awareness that the strictures of gender are inflected by other structures, notably cultural and religious ones.<sup>116</sup> Alcharisi says to Daniel:

'[y]ou are not a woman. You may try—but you can never imagine what it is to have a man's force of genius in you, and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl. To have a pattern cut out—'this is the Jewish woman; this is what you must be; this is what you are wanted for; a woman's heart must be of such a size and no larger, else it must be pressed small, like Chinese feet; her happiness to be made as cakes are, by a fixed receipt.' (541)

Thus, Alcharisi makes an important Eliotian point about sympathy, while simultaneously making a passionate argument about the fate of women, especially gifted women, in a patriarchal society. That is, she tells Daniel that, despite his great compassionate faculty, he can never fully understand what it means to be a woman. At the same time, Alcharisi maintains, to an extent, that genius is gendered male, suggesting that for a woman to claim genius entails a certain gender hybridity. Audrey Jaffe (2000) has noted the parallels between Alcharisi's lack of sympathy and Daniel's own failure to provide Gwendolen with all the sympathy she asks of him. At the same time, Alcharisi continues to make her argument and tell her story, showing that, even if her listener may not ever be capable of fully understanding her, it is nonetheless incumbent on her to tell her story and make her points, and on him to listen with sympathy that both seeks to

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<sup>116</sup> Lewis's discussion of Alcharisi makes part of her larger analysis of how Judaism and Jews are portrayed in *Daniel Deronda*. She argues that, "despite the generally positive portrayal of Judaism and Marian Evans' evident desire to challenge prejudice, *Daniel Deronda* replicates many of the fundamental Orientalist tropes of difference and otherness" (192).

enlarge the understanding and acknowledges that that understanding can never be complete.

Ultimately, Alcharisi disappears from the novel, an authorial decision that allows for multiple interpretations, but that I suggest is not necessarily an act of violence against her as a character, or against the proto-feminist stance she articulates, even though it crystallizes her status as a peripheral character. Deborah Heller (2005) suggests that Alcharisi's disappearance is inevitable, because part of her function has to do with her periphery, in that she "suddenly opens up to the reader's imaginative view—the world suggested by the text but lying beyond the confines of the story it chooses to narrate" (41). Other critics have read her peripheral status as more problematic. Neil Hertz (2003), for example, suggests that she contains many of the anxieties that George Eliot both wishes to expel and yet feels compelled to include.<sup>117</sup> Without dismissing this reading of Alcharisi as a profoundly ambivalent character, I suggest that her casting out might be seen as a concession to the possible rightness of, or at least to the possibility of sympathizing with, her initial choice of a career over motherhood, a choice that in effect has her casting herself out from the narrative of Daniel's life. Alcharisi made a decision to exclude herself from Daniel's life; similarly, George Eliot excludes Alcharisi from the narrative of Daniel's life. At

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<sup>117</sup> Hertz argues that "the casting out of the Princess, her abjection" (120) stabilizes the distance between George Eliot and Alcharisi, whom he reads as a surrogate for the author.

the same time, this exclusion is not, perhaps cannot, be absolute, as Alcharisi's appearance in the novel makes clear.

iii. Lydia Glasher

Lydia Glasher, Grandcourt's discarded mistress and mother of his four children, is another character in whom questions of periphery, sympathy, and gender intersect. Specifically, Lydia demonstrates the ways in which Victorian society denied sympathy to women who have been made peripheral because of their transgressions against society's demands that they conform to rigid codes of sexual and maternal behaviour. Lydia has transgressed both against sexual mores, in her extramarital affair with Grandcourt, and, like Alcharisi, against the idealized mother, in that she abandons her first child to pursue the affair. Because of her marginalized social position, Lydia, along with her children by Grandcourt, is utterly dependent on the sympathy she can win from others, specifically Grandcourt and Gwendolen. Thus, she illustrates the ways in which normative gender expectations can force sympathy into an economy, one that is both literal—Lydia's financial security, and that of her children, depends on inciting sympathy—and figurative, in that sympathizing with her seems to imply having less sympathy for someone else (Gwendolen). As Catherine Gallagher (2006) argues, Lydia's letter "forces Gwendolen to see that she is already redundant, that she will never excite normal affection and admiration because the man she must

try to attract has already spent his little fund of love” (138).<sup>118</sup> Lydia Glasher, then, and as I will argue in this section, shows how normative gender ideology thwarts sympathy by forcing it to become an economic, rather than an ethical, way of structuring relationships between people.

Lydia is peripheral in the sense that she occupies little narrative space, but also, and more significantly, she is peripheral within her society and community. “The complete seclusion” (287) of Gadsmere, where she and her children live, crystallizes her marginalization. The metaphors used to describe her further reinforce her peripheral status: “[n]o one ever talked of Mrs. Glasher now [. . .] she was a lost vessel after whom nobody would send out an expedition of search” (287), and her story is “packed away like old letters” (371). Lydia thus comes to stand for the peripheral itself. She also, however, reveals the arbitrary nature of the peripheral, and part of the reason she inspires such dread in Gwendolen is that she reminds her of the possibility that anyone (especially any woman) might occupy a similar peripheral status. This supports Jaffe’s (2000) claim that “[t]he threat encoded in the sympathetic exchange is that on which a capitalist economy relies: the possibility that the spectator ‘at ease’ and the beggar might indeed, someday, change places” (7). Gallagher (2006) argues that Gwendolen and Lydia do indeed change places through Grandcourt’s displacement of Gwendolen by Lydia in his will (138), a displacement that includes the literal one of exiling

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<sup>118</sup> Gallagher continues: “She [Gwendolen] becomes aware of herself as a final increment who can never be as valuable to her husband as his mistress was” (138).

Gwendolen to Gadsmere. Lydia, then, is a peripheral character, through whom George Eliot comments on the nature of periphery itself: a nature that ultimately proves to be precarious. This suggests that the periphery always encroaches on the centre that it defines: indeed, as Jaffe claims, sympathy with those on the outskirts of society is always tinged with the awareness that social boundaries are permeable.

Lydia's peripheral status also reflects the unevenness of Victorian codes of behaviour for men and women. While Grandcourt's affair with her does not affect his social status, it utterly defines her.<sup>119</sup> George Eliot makes Lydia stand not only for the fallen woman, however, but for all women, in that she is forced to manipulate the sympathies of others for her own survival and that of her children. That Lydia represents not only the sexually transgressive woman but, also, the fate of all women in a patriarchal society, is clear: 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'" (128). Lydia's seclusion at Gadsmere can also be seen as part of the way in which she represents the plight of Victorian women: in its utter isolation, and its being inhabited only by a woman and her children Gadsmere can be seen as the ultimate manifestation of the private sphere. Grandcourt's occasional visits only reinforce

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<sup>119</sup> Graver (1984) takes this as evidence of George Eliot's subversion and critique of normative gender roles, arguing that, in the differing lots of Grandcourt and Lydia, as well as elsewhere in *Daniel Deronda*, "the narrator's commentary often compares men and women but in such a way as to make the reader discount or disapprove of the conventional double standard" (300).

his lack of investment in the domestic space that, for Lydia and her children, virtually constitute the entire world. That Lydia is secluded along with her children marks another of the ways in which she emerges as representative of the female condition: she defines herself primarily as a mother. This can be read as stemming from her guilt at abandoning her first child, but, whatever the cause, Lydia's prime motivating force has come to be securing the future of her children: "[t]hat love [for and of her children] was now the one end of her life" (290). In these ways, then, Lydia's very peripheral status actually signals the centrality of that for which she stands: the ways in which all Victorian women were made peripheral due to the sexual double standard, the separation of spheres, and the identification of them as primarily wives and mothers. By marginalizing Lydia in this way, George Eliot shows how sympathetic ethics conflict with discourses that insist on a binary understanding of gender as foundational to society.

Lydia herself participates in the sexual double standard by attacking Gwendolen, rather than Grandcourt. Lydia asks Gwendolen not to marry Grandcourt, a promise Gwendolen makes but later breaks. On Gwendolen's wedding night, Lydia sends her the diamonds Grandcourt had given her, accompanied by a bitterly reproachful letter, which tells Gwendolen: "[y]ou had your warning. You have chosen to injure me and my children. He had meant to marry me. He would have married me at last, if you had not broken your word. You will have your punishment," and warns, "[t]he wrong you have done me will be your curse" (303). Here, Lydia states that Gwendolen is entirely to blame

for Grandcourt's not marrying her, and Gwendolen herself recognizes the unfairness of this, later wondering, "[w]hy did you put your fangs into me and not into him?" (384). In this way, Gwendolen and Lydia transfer their anger from Grandcourt to each other, thereby re-enforcing the double standard that makes women responsible for maintaining moral and sexual mores.<sup>120</sup>

Lydia recognizes that her future and, especially, that of her children, hinges on her ability to provoke sympathy in others. The primary other on whom she depends is Grandcourt, who provides financially for her and the children: "[s]he [Lydia] was absolutely dependent on Grandcourt; for though he had been always liberal in expenses for her, he had kept everything voluntary on his part" (288). Because she has no legal hold on him, Lydia's only way of supporting herself and her children is to maintain an emotional hold on Grandcourt. Sympathy, thus, becomes economic, in that the emotional work of inciting it is the way in which Lydia must procure her survival and that of her children. Although Lydia is not a wife, charged with the emotional well-being of her family according to the doctrine of separate spheres and expectations of middle-class femininity, she nonetheless does the work of sympathizing similar to that expected of the middle-class Victorian wife. Precisely because she is not technically a wife, her position lays bare the economic structure of this emotional work. Part of the reason Lydia is such an unsettling character is that she brings the economic underpinnings of Victorian marriage to light. Her status as both

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<sup>120</sup> This contrasts with Lucy's refusal to condemn Maggie in *The Mill on the Floss*, and with Dorothea's reaching out to Rosamond in *Middlemarch*.

outsider and embodiment of the strictures placed on Victorian women thus dramatizes the ways in which normative gender ideology hampers sympathetic ethics by forcing sympathy into an economic relationship.

Lydia's strategy to incite sympathy in others is not limited to Grandcourt: she also tries to block his marriage by gaining Gwendolen's sympathy for herself and her children. Although Lydia uses the language of justice in her appeal to Gwendolen—"“[i]t is not fair that he [Grandcourt] should be happy and I miserable, and my boy thrust out of sight for another”” (129)—what she is really appealing to is not Gwendolen's sense of justice, but to her sympathy.<sup>121</sup> One of the ways in which Lydia appeals to Gwendolen's sympathetic imagination is by stressing the affinity between them: “[y]ou are very attractive, Miss Harleth. But when he first knew me, I too was young”” (128), and this affinity remains throughout the text.<sup>122</sup> By drawing attention to what they share, Lydia attempts to forge a relationship of sympathy with Gwendolen. In this she is partially successful: Gwendolen does respond with sympathy, although dread is her overriding affect.<sup>123</sup> Gwendolen's sympathy for Lydia manifests itself in her “determination, that when she was Grandcourt's wife, she would urge him to the

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<sup>121</sup> As Melissa J. Ganz (2008) points out, Lydia has “clearly articulated [her] feelings” (586) to Gwendolen, and this communication of her feelings underscores my argument that her appeal is not so much to Gwendolen's sense of justice but to her capacity for sympathy.

<sup>122</sup> Gallagher (2006), for example, observes that Grandcourt constantly reminds Gwendolen “of her equivalence with his discarded mistress, Lydia Glasher” (138).

<sup>123</sup> Gwendolen's dread does not negate her sympathy, however. Recall, for example, Jaffe's (2000) assertion that “Victorian sympathy involves a spectator's (dread) fantasy of occupying another's social place” (8).

most liberal conduct towards Mrs Glasher's children" (264), and in her assimilation of Lydia and the children into her conscience and consciousness: "[t]hat unhappy-faced woman and her children—Grandcourt and his relations with her—kept repeating themselves in her imagination like the clinging memory of a disgrace" (262). Gwendolen's sympathy for Lydia is clearly undeveloped, and heavily inflected by both dread and guilt, but it nonetheless reveals that she has the germ of a conscience. Lydia, then, does not benefit from Gwendolen's sympathy; rather, her role in the novel seems to be, primarily, to create a reason for Gwendolen's moral growth, even while it takes another, more freely sympathetic, character to nurture it.

The character who nurtures Gwendolen's sympathy is, of course, Daniel Deronda. While Gwendolen's reigning affect is dread, and Lydia's is a conflicted combination of maternal love and vindictiveness, Daniel's is sympathy. He is outside of Lydia's sympathetic economy, in that they never meet, and she has no reason to try to incite his sympathy. For this reason, Daniel's sympathy for Lydia represents the sympathetic feelings that George Eliot promotes. It stops short, however, of her ideal sympathetic ethics, in that it does not lead Daniel to sympathetic action on Lydia's behalf. This contrasts with Farebrother's sympathy, which prompts him to sympathetic action and is at work in his everyday life. Daniel's sympathy for Lydia is problematic in relation to gender stereotypes, as well. Gallagher (2006) describes his sympathy for Lydia (along with other suffering women in the novel), and argues, "[b]ecause Daniel imagines

that his mother must have suffered in the way that Mirah and Lydia Glasher (Grandcourt's former mistress and the mother of his children) suffer, that she must have been the victim of sexual exploitation, he embraces them in his sympathetic imagination" (141). This, of course, implies that Daniel's sympathy is, to some degree, rooted in his investment in the sexual double standard, which posits women as innocent victims and lacking sexual desire. In this way, Daniel's sympathy can be seen as potentially complicit in maintaining gender normativity. With Lydia, then, George Eliot both criticizes the sexual double standard and works within it, showing both that gender stereotypes can thwart sympathy by forcing it into an economy and, at the same time, the possibility that sympathetic ethics can overcome, or, at least, work within, the context of such stereotypes, in that sympathy triumphs over judgment of the fallen woman.

#### iv. Mrs. Meyrick

Mrs. Meyrick contrasts with Alcharisi, Lydia Glasher and Mrs. Davilow as a woman who successfully fulfills the maternal role. Barbara Hardy (2006) sees her as one of the "remarkable portrayals of mother-love" in George Eliot's writings (17). Whereas Alcharisi explicitly rejects the maternal role, and Mrs. Davilow implicitly shrinks from it by spoiling and submitting to Gwendolen, Mrs. Meyrick seems to embrace the role of mother. She seems capable of a particularly capacious sympathy, which she extends not only to her own children,

but also to Mirah, who becomes, temporarily, a sort of foster daughter to her.<sup>124</sup>

Sympathy was an important part of the Victorian ideology of motherhood, as Claudia Nelson (2007) describes: “[t]he Victorian cult of domesticity exalted the middle-class mother as a fount of sympathy” (170). Yet, Mrs. Meyrick’s acceptance of her role as a mother who must be capable of unlimited sympathy does not make her an entirely conventional woman. She encourages her daughters, as well as her son, to pursue education and self-culture, and encourages them to find ways of supporting themselves financially. That she is only one amongst several mothers in *Daniel Deronda* also suggests George Eliot’s recognition of the dangers of naturalizing the desire to become a mother or to act as one. Mrs. Meyrick, then, is not so much an embodiment of idealized maternity as she is a character that has found ways to navigate the circumscribed role into which she is cast.

The Meyrick family can be seen as a foil to the Davilow-Harleth family, with Mrs. Meyrick and Mrs. Davilow representing, respectively, successful and destructive motherhood. Mrs. Meyrick’s motherhood is portrayed positively, and this is in part because of the ways she defies conventional femininity. Unlike Mrs. Davilow, she exposes her daughters to culture for its own sake. Both women are widows, and both are mothers of several daughters (although Mrs. Meyrick also has a son). Yet, although the Meyricks, like the Davilows, are relatively poor, their home and family are almost utopian in their happy simplicity.

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<sup>124</sup> See “Adoption in *Silas Marner* and *Daniel Deronda*” by Marianne Novy, in *Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture* (2004).

Gerlinde Röder-Bolton (1998) suggests that part of the difference between the two households has to do with the attachment the Meyricks have to their physical home, and to the permanence and stability it represents. Mrs. Meyrick, unlike Mrs. Davilow, cherishes her late husband's memory, and commitment to memory is an important part of ethical life in *Daniel Deronda*. The Meyricks are lovers of culture, and their genuine enthusiasm for it contrasts with the Davilow-Harleth family, in which the arts are treated as ornamental accomplishments, rather than as ends in themselves. The Meyrick house, though small, contains "space and apparatus for a wide-glancing, nicely-select life, open to the highest things in music, painting, and poetry" (166-167). Their ability to embrace and celebrate art and culture sets the Meyricks apart from Gwendolen and her family, whose lives are comparatively narrow, despite their similarity in material circumstances.

Mrs. Meyrick can also be contrasted with Lady Mallinger, another mother and (even more) peripheral character. Lady Mallinger's response to Mirah is compassionate but, unlike Mrs. Meyrick's, inflected by anti-Semitic prejudice. Before taking Mirah to Mrs. Meyrick, Daniel contemplates taking her to the Mallingers: "[n]o one kinder and more gentle than Lady Mallinger; but it was hardly probable that she would be at home" (165). Lady Mallinger does act with and express the kindness Daniel expects, inviting Mirah to sing at her party and give singing lessons to one of her daughters, but she always sees Mirah as disadvantaged by her Jewishness: "Lady Mallinger was much interested in the poor girl, observing that there was a society for the conversion of the Jews, and

that it was to be hoped Mirah would embrace Christianity” (192). Ultimately, Lady Mallinger’s gentle kindness prevails over her prejudice, and she, with Sir Hugo, comes to accept Daniel’s marriage to Mirah. Unlike the Meyricks, who are intellectual and interested in culture, Lady Mallinger is portrayed as rather slow-witted. She, for example, “was rather helpless in conversation” (374). Her anti-Semitism is reflexive, the product of unthinking acceptance of dominant cultural prejudices, rather than malicious. The contrast between Lady Mallinger and Mrs. Meyrick, then, underlines the need to supplement feelings of compassion with sympathetic intellectual openness.

Despite the constraints on their activity because of their gender, the Meyrick women find ways of exercising their creativity and industry. As the narrator makes explicit, “mother and daughters were all united by a triple bond—family love; admiration for the finest work, the best action; and habitual industry” (167). Thus, George Eliot unites loving sympathy and admirable taste with that most Victorian of virtues, “habitual industry,” which Chase and Levenson (2009), discussing the work of Sarah Stickney Ellis, identify as a feature of middle-class domesticity. The portrait of the Meyrick household allows George Eliot to unite the ideal and elusive with the tangible, forging a link between the feminized ethic of sympathy,<sup>125</sup> which George Eliot espouses, and the masculinized ethic of work

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<sup>125</sup> See Rachel Ablow’s *The Marriage of Minds: Reading Sympathy in the Victorian Marriage Plot* (2007) on the feminization of sympathy.

already embraced by the Victorians.<sup>126</sup> She, further, shows how women, who have fewer avenues than men open to them for industry and occupation, might embrace this ethic. At the same time, her portraits of other women in the novel, especially Gwendolen, suggest that the Meyricks are exceptional rather than exemplary. In this way, George Eliot lauds women who navigate the constraints placed on them in productive ways, while at the same time refusing to accept that these constraints are therefore beneficial for all, or even most, women.

The Meyrick household becomes a haven of sympathy for Mirah after Daniel rescues her from attempting to drown herself. It is not only a literal refuge for Mirah but, more importantly, a transition between her former life and her new one, in which she is reunited with her brother and faith. This transition is made possible in large part because of the sympathy the Meyricks, especially Mrs. Meyrick, offer her. Although Daniel is her literal rescuer, the Meyricks play a key role in helping Mirah to re-establish her sense of identity and purpose. Miriam Elizabeth Burstein (2004) has pointed out, it is to Mrs. Meyrick, not to Daniel, that Mirah recounts the story of her life (173). The ability to tell one's own story is important in *Daniel Deronda*, as discussed in the example of Alcharisi telling her life story to Daniel. Similarly, Daniel listens to Gwendolen's confessional narratives, about her feelings of guilt and remorse for her marriage and for Grandcourt's death. Audrey Jaffe (2000) has described Daniel's relationship of sympathy to Gwendolen as, at least initially, "parental"

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<sup>126</sup> The best example of the Victorian embrace of industry is probably Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* (1859).

(148),<sup>127</sup> and it is notable that Mrs. Meyrick is an idealized maternal figure, for Mirah as well as for her own children. Like Daniel, Mrs. Meyrick recognizes the importance of listening sympathetically to the ways in which other people construct their lives and histories. She opens up a space for Mirah to unburden herself: “[i]t was what the mother [Mrs. Meyrick] wished, to be alone with this stranger [Mirah], whose story must be a sorrowful one, yet was needful to be told” (178). Telling her story to Mrs. Meyrick marks the beginning of Mirah’s healing, and Mrs. Meyrick seems to recognize the importance of this first step. By having Mrs. Meyrick, rather than Daniel, hear Mirah’s story, George Eliot shows that sympathy is not the exclusive property of one exceptional figure, notably Daniel, but, rather, an ideal potentially available to all.

### III. Surplus Sisters

Sisters in *Daniel Deronda* are peripheral characters who nonetheless contribute significantly to two of this novel’s key themes, gender and sympathy. Both Gwendolen’s sisters and the Meyrick sisters, like the mothers in the novel, show the ways in which sympathy is gendered, and how this has implications for the ability of sympathy to do ethical work. As Claudia Nelson (2007) has discussed, sibling relationships were seen by the Victorians as potential sites of

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<sup>127</sup> Jaffe argues that Daniel, “in taking a parental, feeling role toward her [Gwendolen] and then finding himself unable, or refusing, to fulfill it, he resembles the mother who has similarly repudiated maternal feeling for him” (148), linking Daniel’s sympathy and its failures with another mother, Alcharisi.

sympathy (especially of sisters for brothers), something that exists in *Daniel Deronda* in the Meyrick family, as well as between Gwendolen's cousins, Anna and Rex Gascoigne.<sup>128</sup> In the absence of a brother, as in Gwendolen's family, however, sympathy seems to disappear from the equation. Gwendolen's relationship with her sisters, like that with her mother, is defined primarily by power, rather than by sympathy. The sisters seem to accept Gwendolen's superiority (although Isabel's trick with the panel suggests a desire to subvert this), and this supposed superiority isolates them from her, preventing sympathetic identification. The Meyrick sisters, similarly, accept their brother Hans as superior. This, however, is not presented as problematic or damaging in the same way, suggesting at least a tacit acceptance of the rightness of male superiority within the novel. At the same time, however, the Meyrick sisters, although they do not have the opportunity that their brother does to attend university, engage in intellectual and cultural pursuits. This suggests that they are intellectually, if not socially, equal to him. Furthermore, Hans's studies are not particularly successful, while the Meyrick girls seem more dedicated. Their immersion in the life of the mind is depicted as intimately connected to their

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<sup>128</sup> However, Anna's idolatry of Rex is more extreme than the Meyrick girls' fondness for Hans—when Rex proposes going to Canada, for example, Anna pleads with him to take her with him. She imagines:

'I should like it better than anything; and settlers go with their families. I would sooner go there than stay here in England. I could make the fires, and mend the clothes, and cook the food; and I could learn how to make the bread before we went. It would be nicer than anything—like playing at life over again, as we used to do when we made our tent with the drugget, and had our little plates and dishes.' (71)

sympathy, as I will go on to discuss in more detail. Unlike Gwendolen's sisters, the Meyrick sisters only partially accept the constraints of normative femininity, and it is their tentative subversion of its norms that creates their sympathy, in that it enables them to enter imaginatively into the lives of others like Mirah, and to both understand her desire to work and help her to find means of supporting herself, as they themselves do.

i. Gwendolen's Sisters and the Problem of Odd Women

The primary role of Gwendolen's half-sisters is, collectively, that of benchmark for her sympathetic growth, and to establish her initial narcissism. Initially, they exist to highlight both Gwendolen's self-centeredness and her sense of distinction. She grows up having "always been the pet and pride of the household, waited on by mother, sisters, governess, and maids, as if she had been a princess in exile" and therefore "naturally found it difficult to think her own pleasure less important than others made it" (18). Her sisters, here and elsewhere, thus exist as objects of Gwendolen's narcissism, a defining feature of her character that has been remarked on by many critics, including Audrey Jaffe (2000) and Adela Pinch (2010), although they and others usually discuss this in the context of Gwendolen's relationship to Daniel.<sup>129</sup> Amy K. Levin (1992)

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<sup>129</sup> Jaffe suggests that, "[i]t is a measure of what is conventionally called Gwendolen's narcissism, and may also be viewed as the dynamic of the sympathetic exchange as Eliot imagines it here, that when Gwendolen responds to

suggests that “Gwendolen perceives her sisters primarily as an obstacle, a source of misery in her life” (89). Information about the sisters seems to be filtered through Gwendolen’s consciousness, in which they make but little appearance. As noted by Adela Pinch (2010), “in *Daniel Deronda* it is the act of thinking about another person that is under-represented, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding” (152). Yet, the narrative as a whole treats them in the same dismissive way as does Gwendolen: they appear and disappear as necessary to illuminate aspects of Gwendolen’s character. This can be read in one of two ways: either that the sisters are being described through Gwendolen’s eyes, or that George Eliot shares Gwendolen’s dismissive attitude and initial lack of sympathy for them. The sisters therefore become objects of and for Gwendolen’s sympathy, but not of the novel’s as a whole.

The Davilow sisters help to explain and shed light on Gwendolen’s emotional life, and the ways in which her affective experiences block her sympathy. From the point of view of establishing Gwendolen’s character, one of the most important early scenes in the novel is that in which her sister, Isabel,

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Deronda’s look rather than to his words, what she responds to is her own projection: her image reflected in his eyes” (146). Pinch argues that, “the kind of guessing about someone’s thoughts represented by Gwendolen [. . .] and the ideal of the transparent mind, are revealed in that novel [*Daniel Deronda*] as a kind of narcissism” (15), and that Gwendolen’s thinking about Daniel is characterized by a “sticky narcissism” (148). Other critics who have discussed Gwendolen’s narcissism in detail include Peggy Fitzhugh Johnstone, in *The Transformation of Rage: Mourning and Creativity in George Eliot’s Fiction* (1997), who situates her arguments in the context of the psychoanalytic framework provided by Heinz Kohut and Otto F. Kernberg to show that Gwendolen manifests “what a modern psychologist would call a narcissistic personality” (162).

accidentally causes the movable panel to fly open, startling Gwendolen with the image of a dead face. This is a key scene because it dramatizes Gwendolen's terror, the affective response that most defines her. Marlene Tromp (2000) has argued that the image of the dead face demonstrates Gwendolen's "dread of the ghostly faces that hover around her before she meets Henleigh" (213). Barbara Hardy (1986) suggests that the importance of this event is that it marks Gwendolen's transition from acting into feeling (140). Both Hardy and Gillian Beer (2000) have described the ways in which Daniel later helps Gwendolen to marshal her fear in the service of conscience. Yet, it is this scene that dramatizes Gwendolen's fear, and Isabel might also be seen as an agent (however inadvertent) of Gwendolen's transformation. In this scene, Isabel is described as the "medium" (50) of the panel's opening, a choice of diction that strips her of personality. She is also labeled "[t]he inconvenient Isabel" (51) by the narrator, a description that seems to echo Gwendolen's own sense of her sisters as "superfluous" and "unimportant" (24). In both invoking Isabel's agency as the one who is responsible for this event, and then minimizing her subjectivity, the narrative highlights the ways in which Gwendolen's life and character are shaped by people whose subjectivity she fails to acknowledge or sympathize with, a move that is doubly ironic because of Gwendolen's own (initial) belief in her own agency and power.

Gwendolen's inability to identify and sympathize with others is obvious in her relationship to, and thoughts about, her sisters. Levin (1992) has argued that,

“in confronting her ordinariness, Gwendolen must realize her similarity to her sisters” (91). Gwendolen has been encouraged by her mother to view herself as separate from, and superior to, her half-sisters. She also tends not to discriminate among them. The half-sisters are “four other girls whom Gwendolen had always felt to be superfluous: all of a girlish average that made four units utterly unimportant” (24). Not only does this reflect Gwendolen’s inability to imaginatively construct the inner lives of others, it also points to Victorian anxiety surrounding the fact that women outnumbered men, and, since marriage was the only truly desirable situation for a woman, it was thus inevitable that some women would become “superfluous”.<sup>130</sup> Gwendolen’s inability to sympathize with her sisters can therefore be read, with her financial decision to marry Grandcourt, as part of a larger critique of how economics and gender ideology worked together to narrow the options for women. Gwendolen thinks of her sisters, with resentment: “from her earliest days [they prove] an obtrusive influential fact in her life” (24). Their “influence,” however, is not as individuals, and their inner lives do not touch Gwendolen, are not “obtrusive” on her own; she does not seem able to imagine that they even possess inner lives or separate subjectivities. For Gwendolen, the sisters are not only indistinguishable from each other, but are indistinguishable from the object world in general, in which Gwendolen sees, not other subjects, but either figures to admire her or who

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<sup>130</sup> In *Family Ties in Victorian England* (2007), Claudia Nelson points out that, “[w]omen outnumbered men in Victorian England. In the 1850s, for instance, commentators on the condition of women frequently pointed out that there were 104 females for every 100 males, or half a million ‘superfluous’ women” (15).

impede her desires. The ways in which they obtrude on Gwendolen's life are tangible, and show Gwendolen's preoccupation with her own comfort. For example, Gwendolen complains to her mother about having to teach her sister Alice, saying: "I don't see why I should, else. It bores me to death, she is so slow" (22), and, when her mother criticizes this hardness, retorts, "[t]he hardship is for me to have to waste my time on her" (22). Rather than sympathizing with Alice's difficulties, Gwendolen sees them entirely in relationship to herself. This objectification of the sisters as inconveniences creates a divide that hinders sympathy.

Gwendolen's moral growth emerges most poignantly in her conduct and attitude toward her mother and sisters. Her unhappiness, and Grandcourt's contempt for them, gives Gwendolen a new perspective on her family. Daniel Deronda urges her to find something outside of herself—"[i]s there any single occupation of mind that you care about with passionate delight?" (387)<sup>131</sup>—and, in some ways, her sisters and mother become the external objects on whom she can focus her sympathy. She gives her mother some money, saying, "I wish the girls would spend it for me on little things for themselves" (473). Her mother and sisters thus become objects of Gwendolen's awakening sympathy. Gwendolen is confused by the change in her attitudes. She tells her mother that her sisters, "are troublesome things; but they don't trouble me now" (473) and reflects that "[s]he hardly understood her own feeling in this act towards her sisters" (473). Although

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<sup>131</sup> See Audrey Jaffe's (2000) commentary on this question, which, she suggests, Daniel could equally direct toward himself (148).

Gwendolen does not know how to articulate the change in her attitude and perspective, the shift in her behaviour toward her sisters reveals the way this change has begun within her. While her sympathy for her sisters remains equivocal—at this point she still sees them as “troublesome things”—it marks an important turning point in Gwendolen’s ethical growth. Whether it can be properly called sympathy, rather than pity, remains dubious, in that there is no acknowledgment of her sisters as distinct individuals. Marjorie Garber (2004) points out that the word “sympathy” implies “a condition of equality or affinity” (23). Gwendolen’s own inability to interpret her changing feelings toward her sisters suggests that her actions might spring from a sympathy she is not yet able to recognize as such, and that therefore she lacks the language to distinguish it from pity.

## ii. The Meyrick Sisters

The Meyrick sisters are characterized by an imaginative sympathy that reflects George Eliot’s belief in the importance of art, especially literature, in developing that ethical faculty. Their romanticism can be seen in their love of Sir Walter Scott’s novels, and their inclination to read Mirah through the lens of the romantic heroine. Whereas Gwendolen’s romanticism is dangerous because it is utterly narcissistic, always involving herself as the heroine, the Meyrick girls find romance in imagining the lives of others, especially Mirah and Daniel. This

might partly be explained by the fact that, while Gwendolen pursues culture only on a superficial level, the Meyrick family seems interested in culture for its own sake. This accords with Graver's (1984) argument that "the small house at Chelsea where the poor but cultured Meyricks live become[s] [one of] the loci of genuine poetry, while the drawing room and country estate, along with all the other scenery associated with 'genteel romance,' are shown to be imprisoning" (143). For the Meyricks, the arts are not ornamental, but rather a means of enlarging their understanding of the world and of other people. That the arts play such an important role in their lives is partly because, as women, they are allowed limited access to direct experience, and are often confined to the domestic sphere. Their pursuit of culture thus becomes the primary way in which they develop their capacity for sympathy with the other. For these reasons, the Meyrick girls provide a prime example of George Eliot's emphasis on the importance of the imagination in sympathy.

The Meyrick girls, especially Mab, are emotionally ready to embrace Mirah with sympathy even before she appears. They are particularly ready to offer sympathy because of the reading they have been doing, and because of their emotional responses to it. Mrs. Meyrick has been reading *Histoire d'un Conscrit* to them, to which Mab responds by exclaiming: "[i]t makes me want to do something good, something grand. It makes me so sorry for everybody. It makes me like Schiller—I want to take the world in my arms and kiss it [. . .] I wish I had three wounded conscripts to take care of" (168). They are interrupted by

Daniel entering with Mirah, and Mrs. Meyrick makes the link between Mab's response to the reading and this real opportunity for sympathetic action, saying, "[h]ere is somebody to take care of instead of your wounded conscripts, Mab: a poor girl who was going to drown herself in despair" (169). Carolyn Williams (2004) has discussed this scene, arguing that George Eliot uses it to make the point that even artificial, sentimental fiction can "influence its readers to extend their compassion into the real world—while at the same time she subordinates it within the grander, 'higher,' and more comprehensive claims of her own novel to accomplish this same effect" (128-129). By interrupting the scene of sympathetic responses to literature in this way, and by linking the girls' feelings for literature with their feelings for Mirah, George Eliot illustrates and advances the notion that literature, at its best, can influence the world for good by training and expanding sympathetic responsiveness.

While at times the Meyrick girls' romantic interpretation of Mirah and her situation threatens to overwhelm their sensitivity to her individuality and reality, this danger never materializes in any serious way.<sup>132</sup> This can be interpreted as a refusal on the part of George Eliot to acknowledge the dangers of marrying sentimentality to compassion—dangers discussed by many of the contributors to Lauren Berlant's *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* (2004).

Yet, given her overall endorsement of sympathy as the highest good, and her

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<sup>132</sup> Indeed, Graver has argued that the Meyricks are less romantic than Daniel, and recognize how "far from down-to-earth" he is (238), suggesting that their romantic tendencies align them with the imaginative sympathy celebrated in Daniel, rather than with the dangers of projecting too much onto the other.

exploration elsewhere (in *The Mill on the Floss*'s Maggie Tulliver, for example) of the possible dangers of sympathy overwhelming the subject, it seems that, in the Meyrick girls at least, George Eliot celebrates the ethical usefulness of sympathy as ultimately triumphing over its potential drawbacks. Because the Meyricks are peripheral characters, George Eliot can use them to imagine a productive sympathy with close ties to literature and the other arts, without foreclosing on the possible dangers of such sympathy. Peripheral characters thus becomes sites in which the author can imagine an ideal sympathy, while keeping in tension the realization that such sympathy must remain an ideal, even while it can function as a guide to ethical striving.

#### IV. Conclusion

In *Daniel Deronda*, peripheral female characters complicate the novel's celebration of sympathy as the proper basis for ethical life. This does not mean that they completely undercut it but, rather, that they introduce the need to read sympathy in the context of gendered discourses and economic understandings of relationships and emotions. The characters I have discussed in this chapter show how the subjugation of women, including their relegation to the domestic sphere and the belief in their innate sympathy, actually undermines the ability of sympathy to do ethical work, because it forces sympathy into an economic structure of scarcity and necessity. While the celebration of woman's sympathy

in domestic ideology is potentially positive, in that it affirms the importance of sympathy, gender ideology ultimately threatens to render sympathy ineffective by confining it to the domestic sphere, rather than allowing it to flourish on a larger scale. Furthermore, the belief that women are inherently sympathetic, and that their sympathy is part of the emotional labour demanded of them by the doctrine of separate spheres, threatens to pervert sympathy by making it strategic, rather than diffusive. In this way, *Daniel Deronda*'s celebration of sympathy is inseparable from its critique of the limited options available to women, and this suggests the necessity of reading ethics in the context of cultural discourses.

## Conclusion

While sympathy in *Daniel Deronda* seems to be concentrated in the figure of its title character, it is, in some ways, more diffusive in this novel than in any of George Eliot's previous works. In *Adam Bede*, Seth Bede's sympathy emerges as a counterpoint to his brother Adam's hardness, suggesting that the virtues necessary to communal life might exist across the community, and that this balance is at least as important, not to mention more realistic, as any such balance within the individual. *The Mill on the Floss* both invokes and subverts an economic model of sympathy, in which scarcity seems to demand that sympathy be withheld from some individuals so that it can be given to others, only to offer a

harsh critique of this calculating compassion. *Middlemarch* further complicates George Eliot's ideas about sympathy, showing its relationship to the work of the realist novel. In *Daniel Deronda*, sympathy is central, as the motivating force of Daniel's character. It is also capacious and far-reaching, with its objects including both those near to the self (as in Gwendolen's mother and sisters), and, also, those separated by time and space (as in Daniel's sympathy for the Jewish people). Sympathy in this, George Eliot's last novel, thus becomes something central in its importance, which extends to and includes the peripheral.

*Daniel Deronda* also continues George Eliot's thoughtful exploration of the fraught relationship between gender and sympathy. Like *Adam Bede*, it challenges the traditional equation of sympathy with femininity. Both novels include intensely sympathetic male characters, Seth in *Adam Bede* and Daniel in *Daniel Deronda*. What is different in this last novel is not only that the sympathetic man is a central character, but, also, that his sympathy is shown to be fully compatible with—perhaps even necessary to—his fulfillment of the narrative of normative masculinity, culminating in marriage: Daniel's marriage to Mirah contrasts with Seth's acceptance of his role as bachelor uncle to Adam and Dinah's children. It is Daniel's sympathy that has led him to Mirah, and it is his sympathy with the Jewish people and culture that will define their future life together. Whereas Seth, unlike Adam, does not achieve material success in the form of marriage and children, and is, also, less successful in his vocation than his brother, Daniel's sympathy guides him both to a wife and to a vocation. Although

his sympathy initially seems to block his settling on a vocation, it ultimately becomes inseparable from it when he embraces his Jewish heritage and role as Mordecai's spiritual and intellectual heir. Thus, *Daniel Deronda* revises, in many ways, the tentative nature of *Adam Bede*'s suggestion that masculinity and sympathy might be compatible. Such a revision suggests the increasing sophistication of George Eliot's thinking about sympathy, as well as of her engagement with the discourses of normative masculinity.

Furthermore, sympathy in *Daniel Deronda* is much more diffusive than in *Adam Bede*. Whereas, in *Adam Bede*, characters such as Seth Bede, Mr. Irwine and, especially, Dinah Morris, seem to have a monopoly on sympathy and to stand as guardians of the community's well-being, sympathy in *Daniel Deronda* is promoted as a virtue that should be more widely cultivated. This does not mean that Daniel's status as sympathetic confessor does not mark him out to play a special role but, rather, that other characters are also encouraged to join the sympathetic economy. Gwendolen, for example, and as Daniel recognizes, must cultivate her sympathetic faculty if she is to re-make her life in any meaningful way. Similarly, more peripheral characters, such as the Meyricks, also show the importance of sympathy in the domestic setting. This complements Daniel's transnational sympathy with the Jewish people and religion, and reveals a conviction on the part of George Eliot that sympathy can and should be a diffusive virtue, not only in the people who practice it but, also, in the arenas in which it performs meaningful ethical work. Sympathy is everywhere in *Daniel*

*Deronda*, from the domestic sphere to the historical stage, and is a virtue that seems available, if not to everybody, then certainly to a wider and more diverse group of people (perhaps especially diverse in their range of gender performances) than in *Adam Bede*.

The ways in which *Daniel Deronda* engages the relationship between gender and sympathy also entails a rethinking of normative femininity. Whereas in *The Mill on the Floss* Maggie Tulliver's intense sympathy is associated with her passionate responses to people and things, in *Daniel Deronda* Gwendolen Harleth's passionate outbursts are depicted as either theatrical or motivated by fear, rather than sympathy. The women in *Daniel Deronda* who show the most active sympathy are the Meyrick mother and daughters, and their sympathy, unlike Maggie's, is portrayed as compatible with (relative) conformity to the conventions of femininity. They are more like Lucy Deane than like Maggie, in that they seem to accept the limitations placed on them by society, and are capable of a powerful and productive sympathy (it leads, for example, to their sheltering of Mirah) that does not, as did Maggie's, seem to spring from experiences of suffering but, rather, from their exposure to culture. *Daniel Deronda* thus allows for normative femininity to include sympathy, while at the same time not allowing this to distract from its powerful critique of the limitations placed upon women by gender stereotypes and their correlative expectations.

*Middlemarch* also explores the relationship between sympathy and femininity and, in the peripheral character of Celia Brooke, hints at the complex

relationship sympathy might have with maternity. As my analysis of Alcharisi, Mrs. Davilow, and Mrs. Meyrick has shown, *Daniel Deronda* enters into this problem in more depth. Alcharisi's refusal of the expectation that a mother be sympathetic, Mrs. Davilow's tragically misguided sympathy that only damages Gwendolen's character, and Mrs. Meyrick's sympathy for Mirah that challenges biology as the basis for maternal sympathy,<sup>133</sup> all unite to show the range and diversity of ways in which maternity and sympathy can be experienced and expressed. Sympathy in George Eliot's novels, then, can be equated with neither normative femininity nor masculinity, nor can it be disentangled from gendered discourses and relationships. Rather, it takes on different meanings and manifestations in individual lives and lived contexts, and it is only in the inclusion of a community of characters more or less peripheral that George Eliot can gesture to this diversity. Taken together, *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Middlemarch*, and *Daniel Deronda* reveal George Eliot's vision of both the possibilities and the problems of the ethics of sympathy, and explore the implications of such ethics in the context of individual lives and communities.

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<sup>133</sup> This might, perhaps, be related to George Eliot's evident sympathy and care for George Henry Lewes's sons.

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