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English 026

29 February 2020

The Arts and Marriage in *Daniel Deronda*

Daniel Deronda by George Eliot follows the interwoven stories of Gwendolen Harleth, a spoiled socialite, and the novel's namesake Daniel Deronda, a wealthy young man unsure of his purpose in life. It is an ambitious piece of fiction, grappling with issues such as the Jewish identity in Victorian England, the societal constraints on women, the legitimacy of the theory of predestination, and many more. The most significant of these issues is the nuanced relationship between the arts and marriage. Eliot believes that artistic passion is necessary in creating a passionate marriage, showing that the latter cannot exist without the former. Gwendolen—who desired to be a singer or an actress for the wealth and adoration, rather than a love of the craft—was bound to Henleigh Mallinger Grandcourt, an abusive husband, and ultimately ends up alone. Conversely, Daniel and Mirah Lapidoth were drawn together by their pure passion for music and remained maritally bound in their love for one another. *Daniel Deronda* demonstrates that a commitment to art, rather than celebrity, is necessary in order to commit to marriage by comparing the two institutions and contrasting successful unions between artists with unsuccessful ones between those wanting fame.

The arts and marriage are analogous in two primary ways. First, they are (or rather, should be) passionate struggles. The life of an artist may, at first, seem glamorous: performing to adoring crowds, producing novels for dedicated readers, painting works to be hung in galleries.

However, this is only true for those select few who achieve celebrity. For most, it is “arduous, unceasing work, and – uncertain praise,” but those true artists who endure these hardships understand that “excellence, celebrity, second, third rateness – it is all one” (254). Likewise, marriage is not a simple “happily ever after” like many presume it to be. Making it to the proposal, the ceremony, and life afterward is not so easy; there are highs and lows, as with anything. When the couple has married out of passion, and not for any agenda, they will persist “for better or for worse.” Those who pursue art or marriage for anything other than love are incapable of finding satisfaction in either one, since the challenges they will inevitably face will not be worth it if they do not experience a direct gain.

Second, art and marriage require a commitment to something greater than the individual self. Not just anyone can devote themselves to the outward struggle for excellence and truth, which art demands; “... It is out of the reach of any but choice organisations – natures framed to love perfection and to labour for it; ready, like all true lovers, to endure, to wait, to say, I am not yet worthy, but she – Art, my mistress – is worthy, and I will live to merit her” (255). Marriage is the combination of two individuals, the exiting of their personal sphere of experience and into that of another. Leonora Halm-Eberstein, the formerly renowned actress and singer and Deronda’s mother, voiced this perfectly when explaining why she was incapable of love, saying, “It takes another for a larger self, enclosing this one” (666). Those who are incapable of this kind of commitment, therefore, are doomed to fail in their artistic and marital endeavors.

To demonstrate this, Eliot creates two marriages which either reject the necessary passion and commitment to art and fail or embrace these qualities and flourish. The first is that of Gwendolen and Grandcourt, which is unsuccessful. Gwendolen’s egotism prevents her from

wholly committing to art and marriage. She enters into both for what they can give to her, not what she can give to them—desiring to become a singer for the expected adoration of an audience and agreeing to marriage for its presumed luxuries.

I will explain explicitly how she fails as an artist and a wife, but it is necessary to begin by understanding her character and how it contributed to these failures. Because of how she was raised, by a doting Mrs. Davilow who taught her that she was a superior being to be fawned over, she could not value anything beyond how it made her feel or what it did for her. This occurred with people, as well; Gwendolen saw others not as autonomous beings, but as vessels through which she validated her self worth, “like a piece of yellow and wavy glass that [distorted] form and [made] colour an affliction” (672). Their own lives were irrelevant to her—she needed them solely so that she could be looked at and deemed impressive. Regardless of whether the outcome of her actions was positive or negative on herself or others, “she meant to do what was pleasant to herself in a striking manner; or rather, whatever she could do so as to strike others with admiration and get in that reflected way a more ardent sense of living, seemed pleasant to her fancy” (39). Therefore, she was too self-interested to invest in anything or anyone outside of herself, in the way that art and marriage require.

One could attempt to argue that Gwendolen’s relationship with Deronda contradicts this because she seemed to genuinely care for him and was always reaching out. But she did not truly care about his person or problems, rather she selfishly depended upon him—for advice and escape or to have someone to listen to her. He obliged, of course, because helping others was integral to his character. Gwendolen never once inquired into his life; they have a single conversation about Deronda, when he tells her why he was in Genoa, and he is the one to initiate

it. Even when they are saying goodbye in this same chapter, she speaks only in terms of how *she* has been changed and how *she* will move forward, not of how he was or will. “She was in that state of unconscious reliance and expectation which is a common experience with us when we are preoccupied with our own trouble or our own purposes. We diffuse our feeling over others, and count on their acting from our motives,” and, as such, she did not care for him beyond the ways in which he could benefit her (177).

This translates directly to her art because her inability to commit to something greater than herself caused her to fail as an artist before she had even begun. She became interested in the life of an artist for fame and salvation from futures as a governess or a wife. She sought out musician Herr Klesmer for help; however, she did not ask him how she could have better or more deeply sung and acted, but how she could have taken “as high a rank as [she could]” (253). She did not understand the hardships which accompany art and the obscurity which it commonly entails, scoffing at the prospect of earning the same wages as a dressmaker. Klesmer was one of the few characters who saw past Gwendolen’s superficial perfection; he squashed her preconceived notions of her prospects as an artist, telling her that she “will hardly achieve more than mediocrity” (259) because “beauty is taken when there is nothing more to be had” (260).

Just as Gwendolen considered an artist’s life for the supposed glamorous celebrity, instead of passion, she entered into marriage with Grandcourt for wealth and freedom, instead of love. After her family lost its fortune, she agreed to his proposal in order to avoid becoming a governess—despite her prior insistence that she would never marry. Furthermore, she believed that marriage would have granted her greater liberties (under the impression that Grandcourt would have been easily controlled) and the esteem of high-class peers, but “Gwendolen had

about as accurate a conception of marriage – that is to say, of the mutual influences, demands, duties of man and woman in the state of matrimony – as she had of magnetic currents and the laws of storms” (298). As a result of this ignorance, she mistakenly married an abusive husband whose passion was “as dead as the music of a cracked flute” (340), and, thus, he both mastered her and was indifferent to her. Gwendolen misunderstood the realities of artistic and marital life and entered into them with ill-informed ulterior motives that were only to her detriment.

In contrast, the second marriage in which Eliot exhibits the overlap of art and matrimony has a far better outcome for the couple. Deronda and Mirah were singers with strong connections to their art; in fact, these connections were so pure that they actively rejected the potential for fame. Deronda was an excellent musician, but he in no way desired celebrity; “he set himself bitterly against the notion of being dressed up to sing before all those fine people who would not care about him except as a wonderful toy” (170). Mirah grew up on stage, being looked at and judged by crowds, but these were her father’s wishes. She could not stand “the loud laughing and disputing, strutting, snapping of fingers” because the admiration she had “seemed all very hard and unloving” (213). This is further exemplified by the fact that Mirah’s voice “[would] never do for the public – it [was] gold, but a thread of gold dust” (216). Her music was valuable, and it did not need to be corrupted by popularity.

Their marriage was formed the same as their music, with passion and without agendas. Music first brought them together on the Thames, with Daniel’s rendition of *Otello* and his compassion drawing Mirah from the brink of suicide and into his boat. Their music only continued to bolster their connection throughout the story. For example, when she was singing *O Patria Mia* at Lady Mallinger’s music party, Deronda realized that he was in love, and “Mirah

was equal to his wishes” (559). Once the two were married, he vowed to provide her with “blessed protectiveness,” rather than mastery or indifference (808). Yet, how they arrived at marriage was not straightforward, considering that for roughly six-hundred pages neither one could admit their feelings for the other and they were not permitted to be together because it was not yet known that Deronda was Jewish. However, their love and devotion which they grew through their art allowed them to persevere.

Eliot believes that love for and commitment to art enable those same feelings in marriage. This is quite logical, since art and marriage are extremely comparable, particularly when examining an individual’s intentions for either one. Gwendolen’s desire to become a singer and a wife is extrinsically motivated, brought forth by outside sources of pleasure like fame and fortune, whereas Daniel’s and Mirah’s love for music and one another is intrinsically motivated, coming from something within themselves. It is because Gwendolen’s endeavors are not motivated by her own spirit that they finish so unsatisfyingly, and Daniel and Mirah receive such a fulfilling end because they find a passion within themselves and share it outwards. Eliot demonstrates in *Daniel Deronda* that something derived from this authentic passion is what everyone should strive for and she outcries the selfish interests of those who do not.

Works Cited

Eliot, George. *Daniel Deronda* (*Penguin Classics*). Penguin, 1995.