

“NOT QUITE A HUMAN MOTHER”: TRACING MATERNITY IN *BLEAK HOUSE* AND *DANIEL DERONDA*

by

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(Under the Direction of Roxanne Eberle)

ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I am chasing the mothers in *Bleak House* and *Daniel Deronda*. As I engage in this search for the mystery mothers, Lady Dedlock and the Princess Halm-Eberstein, I am interested primarily in the ways in which that very search—and the “discovery” that follows—structures these two massive Victorian narratives. The narratives of *Bleak House* and *Daniel Deronda* invest their missing mothers with an incredible amount of meaning, meaning that cannot be maintained once the searchers actually confront these maternal characters. I argue that these mothers introduce a profound instability into their respective texts—an instability that accounts for the strangely unsettled concluding chapters of *Bleak House* and *Daniel Deronda*. These two characters have an explosive impact on their respective texts; my intent is to trace that impact.

INDEX WORDS: *Daniel Deronda*, *Bleak House*, Lady Dedlock, the Princess Halm-Eberstein, mothers, narrative, Victorian novel

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B.A., The University of Georgia, 2004

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF

ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2004

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May 2004

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not be possible without the combined effort of a great number of people. I would like to thank Alex Fitzner, Ben Underwood, and Nathan Gilmour—my fellow members in an incredibly successful thesis support group—for their dedicated reading and inspiring commentary. I am also very grateful for the suggestions and commentary of a number of professors. I would like to thank Dr. Tricia Lootens, for her reminders not to judge, Dr. Anne Mallory, for her constant support and insightful critiques, and, of course, my thesis advisor, Dr. Roxanne Eberle, for keeping me working, reading ugly drafts, and cheerfully supporting my efforts.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 "IT IS HER AND IT AN'T HER": SEARCHING FOR MOTHERS AND MEANING IN <i>BLEAK HOUSE</i>	9
3 "DO YOU LIKE UNCERTAINTY?": RESISTING ENDS IN <i>DANIEL DERONDA</i>	28
4 AFTERWORD.....	47
WORKS CITED	55

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the pages that follow, I will be chasing the mothers in *Bleak House* and *Daniel Deronda*. In that effort, I am joined by many of Dickens's and Eliot's characters, who also track the mothers through these two novels. But as I engage in this search for the mystery mothers, Lady Dedlock and the Princess Halm-Eberstein, I am interested primarily in the ways in which that very search—and the “discovery” that follows—structures these two massive Victorian narratives. These two characters have an explosive impact on their respective texts, both in their presence and in their absence; my intent is to trace that impact.

My fascination with mothers—or the absence thereof—in Victorian novels is certainly not unique. The absent mother (and father, in most cases) is essential to many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century narratives; the myth of the foundling depends on the mystery of origins that necessitates parental absence. Carolyn Dever, in *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud*, offers an explanation of the many ways in which the absence of the mother can structure narrative. In the most apparent terms, missing mothers provide mystery—they give the child something to do. But more specifically, the absent mother opens up all kinds of spaces to be filled by the narrative that has been thus created. An absent mother allows for a search for origins, of the kind that became crucial to the Victorians: “In the absence of the mother, the child is left with a personal mystery . . . that motivates a formal search for “origins” in narratives ranging from the orphan discovering the truth of family history to the natural philosopher explicating, in somewhat larger terms, the origin of species” (Dever 23).

As several critics have pointed out, the question of large-scale origins became particularly fascinating for a Victorian audience dealing with the new ideas of geology and evolution. Peter Brooks suspects that “The enormous narrative production of the nineteenth century may suggest an anxiety at the loss of providential plots: the plotting of the individual or social or institutional life story takes on new urgency when one no longer can look to a sacred masterplot that organizes and explains the world” (6). In *Daniel Deronda* particularly, personal origins are deeply connected to large-scale historical origins. In her chapter on *Bleak House*, Christine van Boheemen points to Tennyson’s oft-quoted “Nature, red in tooth and claw” to demonstrate her claim that “With the widening realization that human historical origins are not divine . . . the problem of human identity becomes increasingly acute” (104). But although the Victorians were certainly concerned with origins on a grand scale, they were also very concerned with social identity, an anxiety that, as Richard Altick notes, “stemmed from the ambiguities of rank and wealth in a time of social flux” (17). The absent mother creates a mystery of deeply social implications: where does the child of mystery origins fit in the social schema? The search for the mother is simultaneously a search for origins and for identity—often, specifically, social identity.

Of course, questions of identity and maternity can also lead to psychoanalytic readings, where the influence of the mother (and/or the separation from her) structures human identity. In her book, Carolyn Dever investigates maternal loss (and return) partly in terms of the specifics of object-relations theory. She is concerned—among other things—with tracing the psychoanalytic effect of a missing mother on the child-turned-adult characters. This is not to say that Dever is not concerned with narrative. She makes the very important point that psychoanalysis and the Victorian novel emerge together, historically: “Psychoanalytic methodologies as well as narrative forms are structurally dependent on the symbolic figure of the missing mother” (xii). Although my argument is certainly

informed by psychoanalysis, I will be more interested in the impact these missing mothers have on the narrative than on the character development of the adult-child protagonists—that ground has been covered well.¹

I am interested in investigating the ways in which the characters of *Bleak House* and *Daniel Deronda* function narratologically. The aforementioned issues of historical, social, and psychoanalytic origins are important, for this project, because they endow the Mother with so much narrative importance. Due to her position in regards to origins, the mother is set up as the be-all, end-all. She is the beginning, and as such, should be able to provide the answers to the pressing, disturbing questions of origins that haunted the Victorians. The mother provides a possible solution to the mystery of origins. Of course, the always-present mother does not work so well in this capacity. But the mysterious, absent mother can easily be endowed with an incredible amount of symbolic, and narrative, importance. Dever claims that the very absence of the mother in Victorian fiction allowed for the creation of an ideal. In the space of her absence, all sorts of myths could be created. In a similar way, an absent mother can be endowed with all of the meaning that these texts quest so desperately after.

So, in a strange paradox, maternal characters become both beginning and end. They are clearly linked to origins, but when these mothers become mysteries they also begin to symbolize the ending in that the discovery of the missing mother will provide the solution necessary for conclusion. What I find so fascinating about *Bleak House* and *Daniel Deronda* is the fact that those mothers refuse to provide the expected solutions. And thus they are deeply opposed to conclusion. The connection between mothers and beginnings perhaps necessitates this problem—if mothers are the beginning, then how can

¹See Marcia Renee Goodman's "I'll Follow the Other": Tracing the (M)other in *Bleak House*," Gordon D. Hirsch's "The Mysteries in *Bleak House*: A Psychoanalytic Study," Christine van Boheeman's *The Novel as Family Romance*, and Nancy Nystul's "*Daniel Deronda*: A Family Romance," among many.

they provide the ending? Neither Lady Dedlock nor the Princess provides stability or meaning, and the other characters do not find the answers they seek. Instead the mothers do not mean what they're supposed to symbolize. They are slipping, sliding signifiers who do not bear the burden of maternal meaning.

These characters are so radically de-stabilizing that the text can't finish them—no ending is possible here. But narrative must end. So the desire for closure gets transferred, transposed, displaced onto the default ending for the traditional novel: marriage. But because both novels have been driven by the search for the mother, *not* the desire for marriage, the endings feel strange and unsettled. They don't answer the real questions of the text. We, the readers, are on one path, but we suddenly get derailed onto an entirely different one. The mother plot continues, unsolved, unexplained, but we are suddenly asked to be engaged with the marriage plot. It's as though the text asked one question and then provided an answer to an entirely different question:

Q: "So, what's going on with the mother here?"

A: "The child got married."

My narrative methodology has been influenced by Peter Brooks and D. A. Miller, among others. Although I do not agree with Brooks's use of the male sexual experience as a metaphor for narrative tension, I will certainly be engaged with questions of narrative desire: both *Bleak House* and *Daniel Deronda* are structured largely around the desire for the mother. But the desire that I will be tracing out in these texts is not primarily rooted in the sexual or psychoanalytic, although those forces are certainly present. Brooks often conflates the desire of the reader with the sexual desire of the (male) main character. I too will be connecting the desire of the reader with the desire of the character(s), but the desire I will be most interested in is the desire for *meaning*, and the way in which that desire is

combined with the desire to discover origins, and, specifically, the mother. Also like Brooks, I am fascinated, with “the dynamic aspect of narrative . . . that which moves us forward as readers of the narrative text” (35). I am drawn to the process of reading; I will be just as engaged with the path of the reader through the text as I will be with the path of the protagonist.

Both Brooks and Miller have had an important influence on my work with their focus on what they both designate the “narratable.” Brooks holds that “Deviance is the very condition for life to be ‘narratable’: the state of normality is devoid of interest, energy, and the possibility for narration. In between a beginning prior to plot and an end beyond plot, the middle—the plotted text—has been in a state of *error*: wandering and misinterpretation” (139). As he notes later, “the drive toward the end is matched by an ever more complex, deviant, transgressive, tension-filled resistance to the end” (155). Thus, the characters that seem most transgressive, most resistant to the narrative plan, are actually those characters who fuel the narrative. In describing the return of the supposedly dead/absent mother, Dever, following Claire Kahane, notes that “the absent presence of a mother represents the imminent potential of feminine desire to act as a disruptive force within conventional narrative. The ‘undead’ mother is . . . disruptive to the progress of the narrative” (144). But that which disrupts narrative also, paradoxically, *produces* narrative. I suspect that these “undead” mothers are so imminently “narratable” that they disrupt not narrative, but *endings*. For example, a character who resists marriage—and thus resists the narrative ending—is actually providing the space of narrative. By transgressing the expectations of narrative ends, characters produce the narrative. Tulkinghorn is faced with a similar paradox in *Bleak House*: “There are women enough in the world, Mr. Tulkinghorn thinks—too many; they are at the bottom of all that goes wrong in it, though, for the matter of that, they create business for lawyers” (200). Transgressive women also provide the “business” of narrative.

Of course, Tulkinghorn wants to use these women for his own ends. Although it is true that Lady Dedlock and the Princess Halm-Eberstein serve a definite purpose in their respective narratives, I am interested in the ways they occupy positions of narrative power. This is not to say that these characters can somehow determine, or control, the narratives they inhabit. But both characters have undeniably potent impacts on their respective texts. I am particularly engaged with this perspective because it grants narrative priority to the transgressive female character—although that move is my own, not Brooks's. My privileging of the transgressive character is accompanied by a tendency to privilege instability and disruption and thus sometimes to downplay the inexorable drive of narrative toward conclusion. Another danger is my tendency to privilege the transgressive female character by granting her more narrative power than is granted by the actual text. I hope that my awareness of these dangers will help to rein them in.

I said above that transgressive characters provide the space of narrative, a phrase that suggests another aspect of my narrative methodology. Although I of course acknowledge the importance of temporality to narrative, I tend to look at the narrative events as occurring in a space, or field, rather than along a temporal line. I am interested in the ways in which different narrative events or characters impact that space, regardless of their temporal position in the chain of events. Peter Brooks calls the middle of a narrative “a highly charged field of force” (xiii). Throughout, I will be treating characters and events as forces that interact in just such a narrative “field.” Since I will be thinking of characters in terms of their impact on the narrative space, questions of absence and presence become particularly interesting. If characters inhabit the space of the narrative, rather than a point along a linear progression, then they are always present, even when they are temporally absent. The very nature of my investigation is heavily informed by questions of absence and presence. The missing mothers of *Bleak*

House and *Daniel Deronda* structure the narrative through their absence. But although the specific character of the mother may be absent, she is very much present in the minds of the characters in search of her. Princess Halm-Eberstein is only technically present in the text of *Daniel Deronda* for a couple chapters; nevertheless, she is essential to the structure of the narrative.

Although I am interested in the ways the searches for these mother figures structure the narratives as a whole, I am particularly drawn to the effect of the mother on the endings of both *Bleak House* and *Daniel Deronda*. I will argue that by infusing instability into the narrative, Lady Dedlock and the Princess have a powerful impact on the narrative attempt at closure. D.A. Miller is also, of course, fascinated by the interaction between instability and endings. He defines the “narratable” as:

the instances of disequilibrium, suspense, and general insufficiency from which a given narrative appears to arise. The term is meant to cover the various incitements to narrative, as well as the dynamic ensuing from such incitements, and it is thus opposed to the “nonnarratable” state of quiescence assumed by a novel before the beginning and supposedly recovered by it at the end. (ix)

In *Narrative and its Discontents*, Miller seeks to disrupt that very assumption of “quiescence” by pointing out places in which the supposedly neat endings actually open themselves up to the narratable again. Both *Bleak House* and *Daniel Deronda* demonstrate the impossibility of endings. In both novels, the final sections struggle with the necessity of endings in narrative worlds in which endings are no longer possible.

Many critics have been engaged with the strangeness of the endings of *Bleak House* and *Daniel Deronda*.² I will explore those varied responses in the following chapters, but suffice it to say that my interest in the endings is nothing new. But I will be coming to these endings from a different perspective. I am interested in the connection, in these novels, between mothers and endings, between mothers and beginnings—mothers and narrative, in effect. Although *Bleak House* and *Daniel Deronda* end in very different ways, I will argue that the transgressive mothers, Lady Dedlock and the Princess Halm-Eberstein, powerfully affect the endings of both novels. These characters fuel their respective narratives and then explode any chances for a neat, clean ending.

2 See Joseph Allen Boone's "Wedlock as Deadlock and Beyond: Closure and the Victorian Marriage Ideal," Robin Riley Fast's "Getting to the Ends of Daniel Deronda," Tony Jackson's *The Subject of Modernism*, Dierdre David's, *Fictions of Resolution in Three Victorian Novels: North and South, Our Mutual Friend, Daniel Deronda*, and LuAnn McCracken Fletcher's "A Recipe for Perversion: The Feminine Narrative Challenge in *Bleak House*," among many.

CHAPTER 2

“IT IS HER AND IT AN’T HER”: SEARCHING FOR MOTHERS AND MEANING IN *BLEAK HOUSE*

When questions about narrative are addressed in *Bleak House* criticism, Dickens’s decision to employ two different narrators is usually the topic of discussion.³ The fragmenting of the narrator seems to point to the “fragmented world” of the novel (Hirsch 132). As Gordon D. Hirsch notes, “The reader’s initial response to *Bleak House* usually consists of some confusion and bewilderment, as well as a desire to organize the complex and seemingly disorganized world of the novel” (132). *Bleak House* seems meant for deconstruction—the novel nearly pulls itself apart. LuAnn McCracken Fletcher looks to the narrative voice of Esther Summerson as a main point of destabilization in the text.⁴ And D. A. Miller examines the contradictions of the text in relationship to its depiction of the system, as represented by Chancery: “the text at once claims that the system is and isn’t efficient, is and isn’t everywhere, can and can’t be reformed” (*Novel* 65). But instead of looking to the double narration or Chancery, I am interested in locating Lady Dedlock as the force that ultimately destabilizes the novel.

Lady Dedlock provides the central mystery of *Bleak House*. Although the early parts of the novel suggest that Chancery will provide the novel’s center, the impending events make it quite clear that the overriding desire of the narrative—for readers and characters alike—is to

3 See Phillip Collins’s “Some Narrative Devices in *Bleak House*,” and W. J. Harvey’s “The Double Narrative of *Bleak House*,” among many.

4 See “A Recipe for Perversion: The Feminine Narrative Challenge in *Bleak House*.”

know Lady Dedlock. Lady Dedlock is inordinately fascinating (and de-stabilizing) because she is desirable in so many different, even contradictory, ways. She is mother to the main character, so she is desirable as a means of understanding origins. And since those origins are mysterious, the desire to discover them—in the face of covering and distraction—becomes even more powerful. But in addition, the desire to “know” Lady Dedlock is erotically charged by characters who desire her sexually. Hirsch, for example, suspects that “Tulkinghorn’s knowledge of Lady Dedlock’s love affair may be an adequate substitute for her seduction” (149). Lady Dedlock is, of course, “the most well-groomed woman in the whole stud” (13), a woman whose picture is included in the Galaxy Gallery of British Beauties (494).

Lady Dedlock’s position as a Beauty of high social standing is also important because so many of the characters wish to find out more about this “Lady,” who exists largely as an *image*. Lady Dedlock is endlessly fascinating because the very noticeability of her facade suggests that there is more to be discovered behind it. The discovery of Lady Dedlock’s sexual secret provides a form of access to this imagined interiority. Importantly, though, it is the interaction between Lady Dedlock’s double status as sexual being and mother that is so potent. As Carolyn Dever explains, “the body of Lady Dedlock . . . presents its own vexed issues for this text, for it is impossible to separate the maternal body from the dangerous body of the sexually transgressive woman” (89). In the narrative of *Bleak House*, the character of Lady Dedlock is completely overdetermined. She must bear the burdens of maternity, origins, meaning, sexual desire, and, ultimately, narrative itself.

Throughout *Bleak House*, characters and readers alike search unceasingly for Lady Dedlock. But just as Dickens creates a character who is so irresistibly desirable, he also questions the very ethics of desire, especially the desire for secrets, for knowledge. From the earliest pages of *Bleak House*, Lady Dedlock is being tracked: “My Lady Dedlock has returned to her house in town for a few days

previous to her departure for Paris, where her ladyship intends to stay some weeks; after which her movements are uncertain. The fashionable intelligence says so” (11). And as early as the conclusion of Chapter II, Lady Dedlock alerts Tulkinghorn to her connection with the mysterious law writer with her question, “Who copied that?” (16). Readers catch the hint as quickly as Tulkinghorn, and the search for Lady Dedlock’s secret begins.

In addition to providing the secret that will fuel the narrative that is *Bleak House*, Lady Dedlock’s past also provides the opening for Esther’s narrative. In a pattern that will reappear in *Daniel Deronda*, the introduction of Esther coincides with the introduction of her questionable birth. Like so many nineteenth-century novels, Esther’s narrative opens in the absence of a mother. While Esther has neither parent, Dickens quickly establishes the priority of the mother. As Esther explains, “I had never heard my mother spoken of. I had never heard of my papa either, but I felt more interested about my mama” (18). In the early sections of *Bleak House*, narrative tension consistently emerges out of the void left by absent parents. Esther’s dependent status matches that of her fellow orphans Richard and Ada. And in the first house the three visit together, the mother is, for all practical purposes, missing; the Jellyby’s are orphaned by their mother’s neglect. As in *Daniel Deronda*, the origin of the narrative is to be found in an absence of origin—the story begins because the main character does not know where he or she “began.” Dever notes the importance of the title of Esther’s first chapter, “A Progress,” and the fact that it is the third, not the first, chapter of the novel: “This is a moment which puts into question the status of the originary; although Esther does not respond actively to the events of the previous chapters, the opening of her story is already contingent, already inflected with the markers of an anterior presence” (87).

In a pattern that will continue throughout the novel, Lady Dedlock provides an opening for narrative in these sections both through her absence and her presence. Her presence as the universally admired, yet mysterious, lady of fashion prompts desire in many forms, one, at least, being the desire to discover her secret. But her presence as Lady Dedlock coincides with her absence as Esther's mother. And Esther's story—in the opening chapters, at least—is completely fueled by her status as dependent orphan. The desire of Esther's narrative is, largely, the desire to find a home.

But the desire of the novel as a whole is the desire to know Lady Dedlock's secret. This desire seems nearly universal, with Guppy, Tulkinghorn, Bucket, and even Boythorn and Jobling joining the efforts of the fashionable intelligence. Guppy's interest is piqued on his visit to Chesney Wold, where he is "fixed and fascinated" by Lady Dedlock's portrait (82). Importantly, Guppy is not drawn to Lady Dedlock's portrait because of its beauty; he notices it, of course, because he recognizes Esther's face. But it is not even the half-recognition that accounts for Guppy's fascination. It is the *mystery* of the recognition that matters: "the more I think of that picture the better I know it, without knowing how I know it" (83). Even this early in the novel, Guppy recognizes the fact that this mystery of the portrait is a mystery, not of appearance, but of narrative. He wants to know the story of the picture. When Rosa mentions the old story of the Ghost Walk, Guppy immediately connects that story with his own mystery. "Greedily curious," he asks "what's the story, miss? Is it anything about a picture?" (83). Dickens's combination of curiosity and greed is important here; early in *Bleak House*, Dickens begins to question the ethics of curiosity.

Even characters as minor as Boythorn and Jobling are puzzled and fascinated by Lady Dedlock. Jobling's interest accords with that of the fashionable intelligence. As we learn later, her picture is included in the "Galaxy Gallery of British Beauty" which decorates Jobling's wall: "To be informed

what the Galaxy Gallery of British Beauty is about, and means to be about . . . and what Galaxy rumours are in circulation, is to become acquainted with the most glorious destinies of mankind” (256). Jobling wants to know Lady Dedlock’s secret, even if only along with his desire to know all the fashionable secrets. Boythorn is more interested in Lady Dedlock herself. He fumes, “Whatever can have induced that transcendant woman to marry that effigy and figure-head of a baronet, is one of the most impenetrable mysteries that have ever baffled human enquiry” (220). Boythorn is oddly prophetic here. I will argue that although many characters learn the facts of Lady Dedlock’s secret, none of them (except perhaps Esther) get Lady Dedlock’s story. She remains an “impenetrable mystery,” a woman who uses her beautiful facade to her advantage, as an impenetrable defense.

Of course, Tulkinghorn and Bucket are the most dangerous, powerful detectives in search of Lady Dedlock. As the narrator points out, Lady Dedlock would be better off with “five thousand pairs of fashionable eyes upon her, in distrustful vigilance, than the two eyes of this rusty lawyer” (358). Tulkinghorn is clearly a frightening presence in the novel. And Bucket, although certainly more appealing, is troubling as well. He works with Tulkinghorn, tries to arrest a dying Gridley, accuses George of murder, and, worst of all, spends most of the novel forcing Jo to “move on.” Although Bucket transforms into a more and more attractive character as the novel continues, Dickens is careful to remind us of his problematic status. Esther discovers Bucket’s involvement in Jo’s disappearance only in the midst of the chase for her mother, at which point Bucket has reached nearly heroic status (681). Of course, Skimpole receives most of the blame here, but Bucket’s account of the story immediately reminds us of Jo’s constant fear of him.

In the earlier scenes of the novel, Tulkinghorn and Bucket seem almost to be extensions of each other. When Mr. Snagsby tells Tulkinghorn Jo’s story, he is shocked to discover that they are not

alone: “Dear me, sir, I wasn’t aware there was any other gentleman present” (275). Snagsby is completely puzzled as to Bucket’s “ghostly manner of appearing” (275). In this scene—our first meeting with Bucket—it seems as if the detective has mythically sprung from Tulkinghorn. In any event, Tulkinghorn certainly envisions Bucket as an extension of his own investigative powers. As he explains to Snagsby, “I wanted him to hear the story . . . because I have half a mind . . . to know more of it, and he is very intelligent in such things” (275). It’s not much of a stretch to see Bucket as Tulkinghorn’s “half a mind.” As *Bleak House* progresses, Bucket gains more and more authority, and, with Tulkinghorn’s death, he becomes the prime, all-powerful, detecting force in the novel. He even takes over Tulkinghorn’s exact space and status in Sir Leicester’s abode: it is “at present a sort of home to him, where he comes and goes as he likes at all hours” (628). Tulkinghorn was, of course, equally comfortable, being “quite at home, at the corners of dinner-tables of country houses” (14).

In addition to occupying the same physical space, Bucket and Tulkinghorn also serve the same narrative purpose. They, along with Guppy, put the pieces of the puzzle together in order to discover Lady Dedlock’s secret. They are the trackers. And they are the readers. The reader of *Bleak House*, who watches for clues and attempts to discover the connections between different characters, must ultimately be identified with Tulkinghorn and Bucket. By making his investigators—particularly Tulkinghorn—such threatening, unethical characters, Dickens seems to be questioning the whole idea of narrative as quest for knowledge. In this novel, even the members of the fashionable intelligence are dangerous. They track the visitors at Chesney Wold, like “a mighty hunter before the Lord, [which] hunts with a keen scent, from their breaking cover at St. James’s to their being run down to Death” (144). Dickens’s metaphor here is particularly apt; after all, Lady Dedlock is very much hunted, and ultimately “run down to Death.”

Jo shares Lady Dedlock's experience. He too is tracked down, by a strange assortment of characters: Tulkinghorn, Bucket, Snagsby (unwillingly), Guppy, Chadband, Mrs. Snagsby, and even Woodcourt. Despite Bucket's insistence to Snagsby that "It's alright as far as the boy's concerned . . . Don't you be afraid of hurting him" (276), we know by the end of the novel that Jo, too, has been "run down to Death" (144). As Jo explains, "I have been moved on, and moved on . . . and they're all a watching and a driving of me. Every one of 'em's doing of it"—a feeling Lady Dedlock would be sure to recognize (382). Later in the novel, Jo's fears focus on single figure, Bucket, who he believes "is in all manner of places, all at wunst" (559). Even Woodcourt and Jarndyce get strangely implicated in the drive to know Jo's story. Since these two characters are "saving" Jo (for his death) their questions should not be threatening. Woodcourt "elicits" Jo's story (561), and Jo is willing to repeat it to Jarndyce upon request. But Jo's response after telling his story to Jarndyce is important: "Let me lay here quiet, and not be chivied no more" (567). Even the "innocent" curiosity of Woodcourt and Jarndyce exhausts Jo.

It seems essential to the overall narrative of *Bleak House* that Woodcourt and Jarndyce hear Jo's story. Jo's story pulls everything together; his narrative is central to the larger story of the novel. But in the same text that relies on Jo's story, there seems to be a desire for Jo's silence. The text makes Jo speak just as it wishes to grant him peace and quiet. In his presentation of the search for Jo, Dickens continues to address the concern with the ethics of curiosity that is so central to the Lady Dedlock plot. In *Bleak House*, Dickens simultaneously creates a narrative that quests unrelentingly after Lady Dedlock and questions the very ethics of that quest. Without the search for Lady Dedlock, without the desire to hear her story, there would be no narrative. But that very search, conducted by the novel's most problematic characters, ends by driving her to her death.

The fact that the search for Lady Dedlock is so compromised may account for the strangeness of Esther's relationship to that search. Very early in the novel, Esther is eager for information about her mysterious mother: "O, do pray tell me something of her. Do now, at last, dear godmother, if you please! What did I do to her? How did I lose her?" (19). Esther's questions here reflect a childlike belief in self as center. She believes that she must have caused the loss of her mother. Of course, the answer Esther receives is horrible enough to stop her from asking any more questions. From that point on, Esther seems very reluctant to express any desire to know her own origins. Although she stays awake wondering over "shadowy speculations . . . as to what knowledge Mr. Jarndyce had of [her] earliest history" (76), when he asks her if she wishes to ask him anything about herself, she answers, "I have nothing to ask you; nothing in the world" (92).

After Lady Dedlock reveals herself to Esther, Esther begins to oppose the search for her mother. She warns Guppy off the track and experiences a "terror of [herself], as the danger and possible disgrace of my own mother" (453). So, in a strange twist, Esther is the one character in the novel who is *not* tracking Lady Dedlock. As Hirsch notes, "Esther is undoubtedly most affected by the mystery surrounding her birth, and yet she is probably the least interested in taking action to establish the identity of her parents" (139).⁵ Of course, one explanation is the simple fact that midway through the novel, Esther does know the secret. She doesn't have to continue the search because, she, unlike any other character, receives Lady Dedlock's explanatory letter. Importantly, this letter does not get passed on to the reader. Esther explains that "What more the letter told me, needs not to be repeated

5 Hirsch uses Esther's lack of curiosity to demonstrate that she represents one of three infantile responses to the discovery of parental sexuality: "One possible outcome is that curiosity and thought may become inhibited" (133). Tulkinghorn offers an example of "neurotic compulsive thinking" and Bucket the third option: "the originally sexualized energy (libido) is entirely sublimated in the service of intellectual interests" (133).

here. It has its own times and places in my story” (453).⁶ The reader, however, never learns the story of the letter. Lady Dedlock’s personal explanation of her past remains a mystery.

Esther’s early discovery of her mother—in relationship to all of the other characters—makes for a surprising twist on the mystery. As I mentioned above, I suspect that Esther is partially removed from the search because *Bleak House* suggests that the search for the mother is a problematic, even an immoral, task. So although Esther has the most motivation for discovering her mother, her desire to know Lady Dedlock is displaced onto all of the other characters. As is repeated elsewhere in the novel, Esther’s desire is much too dangerous to address directly. But the attempt to distance Esther from the search for Lady Dedlock fails. Ultimately, she is pulled back in, to quest as a participant in Bucket’s final chase, where the intellectual detection of most of the novel is replaced by a literal, full-speed hunt. She cannot be kept out of the final search because Esther does indeed want to find and know her mother. The fact that Esther has managed to deny that desire throughout the novel does not erase that desire. In fact, in Esther’s case, her tendency *not* to discuss her desire may very well be proof of its existence.

Esther’s first meeting with her mother—as mother—in the woods of Chesney Wold enacts a pattern that will reappear in the final hunt for Lady Dedlock. In that scene, Esther finds her mother only to lose her again. Even before Lady Dedlock speaks, Esther is powerfully affected by “a something in her face that I had pined for and dreamed of when I was a little child” (448). Although Esther relegates her desperate longing for a mother to her childhood years, the yearning is still very present in this scene. Instead of meeting Lady Dedlock’s confession with anger or resentment (unlikely emotions for Esther

⁶ Esther’s secrecy here is also clearly motivated by Dickens’s own narrative project—Lady Dedlock’s secret must be kept to maintain suspense.

Summerson), Esther meets her with a “heart overflow[ing] with love” (449). She asks only to “bless her and receive her” (449). She asks, ultimately, to treat Lady Dedlock as a mother.

Lady Dedlock refuses that request: “To bless and receive me . . . it is far too late” (449). Dever explains that “Although Esther offers a rhetoric of forgiveness, her mother will accept only a rhetoric of disavowal . . . [Esther] has had rejection dictated to her” (84). Instead of agreeing to play the part of mother, Lady Dedlock explains to Esther that “We never could associate, never could communicate, never probably from that time forth could interchange another word, on earth” (450). The enforced separation is clearly motivated solely by Lady Dedlock. She goes so far as to physically remove herself from Esther: “she was so firm, that she took my hands away, and put them back against my breast, and, with a last kiss as she held them there, released them and went from me into the wood” (452). Despite Lady Dedlock’s mournful, impassioned rhetoric, she still ultimately refuses the maternal.

In announcing her presence as Mother, Lady Dedlock simultaneously announces her absence. Esther is aware of the strange dualism of her relationship with her mother even before this confrontation, when she remembers the influence of Lady Dedlock’s gaze: “I do not quite know, even now, whether it was painful or pleasurable; whether it drew me towards her, or made me shrink from her” (284). Esther also communicates the trauma of this present absence later in the novel, when she notes that “It matters little now, how much I thought of my living mother who had told me evermore to consider her as dead” (521).⁷ Although Esther discovers her mother’s identity, she is left with precious little in the aftermath of their confrontation. She does, importantly, receive her mother’s letter, which she does not share with the reader. By denying us Lady Dedlock’s story, Dickens simulates Esther’s frustration for

7 Esther’s emotional confusion over her living/dead mother is echoed by Bucket’s musings during Lady Dedlock’s flight: “Where is she? Living or dead, where is she?” (673). Both characters recognize the fact that Lady Dedlock is a seriously unstable presence in the novel.

the reader. Esther finds her mother only to lose her, while the reader catches a glimpse of the “truth” of Lady Dedlock’s story, only to be denied access to that truth.

Esther’s confrontation with her mother is mirrored by the all-out search for Lady Dedlock that provides the mounting tension of the penultimate section of the novel. That tension is largely due to the fact that both the characters within the text and the readers without invest Lady Dedlock with an immense amount of importance. As Bucket explains to Sir Leicester, “She is the pivot it all turns on” (638). Since her mystery structures the narrative, the solution to that mystery should provide the answers, the meaning, that is so desperately desired in the confused, sometimes meaningless, world of *Bleak House*. The novel makes Lady Dedlock its center, and then expects her to provide the stability that is usually to be expected from a center. But instead of providing answers or stability, Lady Dedlock instead infuses the narrative with instability and confusion. Instead of supplying answers, she provides only more questions.

This pattern, in which a desperate search results in emptiness, is also, of course, reflected in the Chancery plot.⁸ As Jarndyce explains of Richard, “He looks to it, flushed and fitfully, to do something with his interests, and bring them to some settlement. It procrastinates, disappoints, tries, tortures him . . . but he still looks to it, and hankers after it, and finds his whole world treacherous and hollow” (435). Everywhere in *Bleak House* desires for meaning are constantly disappointed. Richard’s desire matches Esther’s. He hopes for the social stability that Esther might find in a discovery of her origins. Both Richard and Esther hope to understand—and possibly solve—the problems of the past in order to structure their future. Nearly all of the characters in the novel look to either Lady Dedlock or Chancery

8 Hirsch also notes the similarities, asserting that “Dickens’ symbolism implies . . . that Chancery disputes are institutionalized versions of family conflicts” and that the language used to describe Richard and Ada’s situation is similar to the descriptions of Esther’s illegitimacy (145).

to provide meaning and structure. Interestingly, Dickens links the two by connecting Chancery to the parental. Ada and Richard are, of course, wards of the court, and Esther makes the connection clear when she notes that the Lord Chancellor “appeared so poor a substitute for the love and pride of parents” (31). The narrator informs us that “innumerable children have been born into the cause” (8), Jarndyce speaks of the “uncertainty and procrastination on which [Richard] has been thrown from his birth” (151), and Ada warns Richard of “the shadow in which we both were born” (466). Chancery is everywhere connected with the moment of birth—a connection that may point to a more specific suggestion of the maternal. Indeed, Jarndyce refers to an almost semiotic moment when he explains to Esther that “Jarndyce and Jarndyce was the curtain of Rick’s cradle” (435).

Chancery is certainly a very masculine, even paternal, presence in *Bleak House*. But there is also a connection between Chancery and the mother—specifically Lady Dedlock. Richard’s experience with paternal Chancery mirrors Esther’s experience with the maternal. Esther chases her mother down to the point of discovery, only to find death. Likewise, Richard chases Chancery until a will—a chance at meaning—appears. Bucket forces Smallweed to produce a will that Kenge claims is “of later date than any in the suit” (739), and should thus solve the case. Ultimately, the Jarndyce suit becomes a search for legal origins, with one will pre-empting another. But this new chance at solution can never be accessed. Richard is too late. The cause, like Lady Dedlock, has died of sheer exhaustion.

In the penultimate section of the novel, the elsewhere diffuse narrative of *Bleak House* converges on a single story line: Bucket’s search for Lady Dedlock. Esther suddenly enters the usual space of Bucket and the third-person narrative; everyone comes together to chase the secret. Characters as diverse as Guster, the Snagsbys, Jenny, Sir Leicester, Jarndyce, Bucket, and Esther are

all implicated in this final hunt. The energies of the novel rise to a fevered pitch as Bucket, with Esther at his right hand, chases Lady Dedlock through the sleet and snow. By this point in the novel, the reader has begun to be convinced that Bucket is indeed all-powerful. So when he assures Sir Leicester of his devotion to the search, we—the readers—are inclined to believe him: “Don’t you be afraid of my turning out of my way, right or left; or taking a sleep, or a wash, or a shave, till I have found what I go in search of” (670). Bucket later explains to Jarndyce that he has been “employed by Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, to follow her and find her—to save her, and take her his forgiveness” (672). But Bucket, surprisingly, fails in his mission. Despite the energy he pours into the hunt, Lady Dedlock manages to escape him. She fools him into following “the dress” (686) and buys herself time to die as she chooses.

It might be difficult to see Lady Dedlock’s death as success, especially given the fact that her story fits so well into the fallen woman plot. Dickens has certainly been foreshadowing her death; the river (the default ending for a fallen woman)⁹ is a major focus in Bucket’s search, and Sir Leicester’s attendants seem fairly certain of her fate. The narrator warns, “The day comes like a phantom. Cold, colourless, and vague, it sends a warning streak before it of a deathlike hue, as if it cried out, ‘Look what I am bringing you, who watch there! Who will tell him [Sir Leicester]?’” (702). So the question of Lady Dedlock’s power to determine her own ending is certainly a complicated one. She does die according to her own wishes. As she tells Esther, “I will outlive this danger, and outdie it, if I can” (451).

9 For analyses of the visual and textual representations of the fallen woman at the river, see Murray Roston’s “Disrupted Homes: The Fallen Woman in Victorian Art and Literature,” and Roxanne Eberle’s *Chastity and Transgression in Women’s Writing, 1792-1897*.

Bucket fails, hence, I argue that Lady Dedlock escapes. Bucket, despite his all-encompassing powers of deduction, cannot find Lady Dedlock alive. He cannot make her speak; she does not have to tell her story. She maintains the determination she expressed to Tulkinghorn earlier in the novel. Despite the fact that he knows the facts of her story, he never gets her version of the secret. As she tells him, “Of repentance or remorse, or any feeling of mine . . . I say not a word. If I were not dumb, you would be deaf. Let that go by. It is not for your ears” (509). Lady Dedlock knows that despite Tulkinghorn’s desire for her story, he could not understand it. Somehow, Lady Dedlock’s story is one that can be neither told nor heard, or at least not heard correctly. Lady Dedlock wants to protect her story from the danger of interpretation. As Brian Cheadle argues,

the silence that surrounds all the phases of the relationship [that between Lady Dedlock and Nemo] . . . opens up a space for standing outside the oppositions in terms of which judgements are constructed within Victorian society. If we know neither the details of Lady Dedlock’s transgression, nor what her real motives were in her restless return to Hawdon’s grave, we are powerless to judge. (42)

Throughout the novel, one of the sources of Bucket’s power has been his ability (or at least his claim) to know people. Although Bucket spends the entire novel telling the other characters that he “know[s]” them, he cannot maintain that position with Lady Dedlock. Neither he, nor the reader, can know or judge her.

Lady Dedlock provides no answers. She gives no explanation for her actions—except perhaps in a letter that the reader never receives. She refuses to be the mother and she refuses to explain why. She offers no answers in return for the many questions of those who chase her. Although she does ultimately play the traditional role of “fallen woman,” Lady Dedlock manages to maintain a space for

herself that is never discovered. She maintains her mystery to the end. Instead of providing the unstable world of *Bleak House* with some stability, she instead provides only instability.

Throughout the novel, the fascination (on the part of characters and readers alike) with Lady Dedlock is partly fueled by her impressive ability to control the version of herself that she presents to the world. Lady Dedlock's status as "Lady" is certainly important here. Her social status automatically makes her an object of interest, as demonstrated by the efforts of the Fashionable Intelligence. Her status as a public persona—one of the members of the "Galaxy Gallery" also automatically suggests that there is more to be discovered. The text always suggests that there is something more behind Lady Dedlock's cold facade. It is almost as if there are two Lady Dedlocks—the exterior of the beautiful, fashionable, cold Lady and the interior of a private, more vulnerable, emotional woman. All of the characters in search of Lady Dedlock attempt to get behind that facade. Tulkinghorn and Bucket want to know the interior secret, while Esther wants to see Lady Dedlock in the personal, vulnerable role of mother.

There is something dangerously aggressive in the attempt to discover Lady Dedlock's interiority, as she is fully aware. Lady Dedlock's goal is to protect her own sense of self, a self that seems strangely inseparable from her secret. To Esther, Lady Dedlock articulates the difference between her persona and her person in terms of the secret: "If you hear of Lady Dedlock, brilliant, prosperous, and flattered; think of your wretched mother, conscience-stricken, underneath that mask! Think that the reality is in her suffering, in her useless remorse" (452). The secret of Esther's birth is the only way in which Lady Dedlock can differentiate herself from her persona. Her secret is so deeply important because, for her, it stands for her interiority. Our only knowledge of Lady Dedlock's first name,

Honor¹⁰, comes in connection with the letters written during her affair. Her individuality is clearly deeply tied to her secret. And thus Tulkinghorn's discovery of that secret is all the more threatening. When Tulkinghorn and Lady Dedlock meet on the night before the murder, Lady Dedlock begins to explain her actions in regards to Rosa:

“If sir,” she begins, “in my knowledge of my secret—” But he interrupts her.

“Now Lady Dedlock, this is a matter of business, and in a matter of business the ground cannot be kept too clear. It is no longer your secret. Excuse me. That is just the mistake. It is my secret, in trust for Sir Leicester and the family. If it were your secret, Lady Dedlock, we should not be here, holding this conversation.” (581)

Tulkinghorn attempts to usurp Lady Dedlock's interiority, to rewrite the personal in terms of “business.” The “ground” that “cannot be kept too clear” is the very ground of Lady Dedlock's subjectivity, which she has guarded so carefully.

But despite Tulkinghorn's frightening power here, and his belief that he has co-opted Lady Dedlock's secret, he never gets her own version of the story—he never gets as far in as he would like. He only possesses his version of her secret. Both Guppy and Tulkinghorn are faced with their inability to “read” Lady Dedlock. Guppy knows “that he has no guide, in the least perception of what is really the complexion of her thoughts” (415). Lady Dedlock's ability to control the intensity of her emotions in the face of his discovery impresses even Tulkinghorn; as he realizes, “The power and force of this woman are astonishing” (508). Lady Dedlock's ability to control her face is mirrored by her ability to disguise herself through costume. Jo is completely at a loss when faced with Hortense in Lady

¹⁰ Dickens's choice of name here is fascinating. It can certainly be read as ironic, but there also seems to be a suggestion that honor, rather than dishonor, characterizes Lady Dedlock's relationship with Hawdon.

Dedlock's disguise: he wonders, "with a perplexed stare" that "It is her and it an't her" (282). Jo's inability to identify Lady Dedlock here is matched by an inability that pervades the entire narrative. Bucket makes the same mistake, when he searches for "the dress" (686), rather than the woman. Despite the desire for Lady Dedlock's interiority, the characters in search of her remain distracted by her exteriority.

Identifying Lady Dedlock is, ultimately, the challenge of the narrative. And, it is a challenge that is never fully achieved. Several critics have pointed out the indeterminacy of Esther's character in *Bleak House*. Her many different names point to "a plurality of identities" (Dever 94). But Lady Dedlock's identity is just as slippery.¹¹ Lady Dedlock threatens stability because she refuses to match symbol with meaning. She enacts a disturbance between sign and signifier that introduces a profound instability into the text. Even Esther is not sure who she has found in the final moments of the search: "I saw, with a cry of pity and horror, a woman lying—Jenny, the mother of the dead child" (713).¹² And when she discovers her mistake, it is to find her "mother, cold and dead" (714). The narrative of *Bleak House* is deeply invested in the search for Lady Dedlock. But when characters and readers alike finally find her, we, like Esther, get only emptiness, silence, and death. In finding Lady Dedlock, we are faced, not with answers, but with a disturbing gap in the text.¹³

11 In his fascinating study of filth and odors in *Bleak House*, Robert Lougy claims that "Lady Dedlock remains . . . an ambiguous and uncontained signifier by virtue of those smells and stains that cling to her" (on-line).

12 The doubling is certainly important here. For one reading, see Dever's *Death and the Mother*, p. 868.

13 Cheadle sees Esther's discovery of her mother at the gates of the cemetery as a return to her origins, and he notes that "At the origin there is, it would seem, not plenitude but continuing lack . . ." (32). Cheadle does later maintain that Esther is able to move on, claiming that the "the discovery scene has the mysterious force, after all, of a kind of epiphany and release" (43).

That gap appears literally in the text in the space between Chapters 59 and 60. We conclude Chapter 59 with Esther's discovery of her mother, with the words "cold and dead." In the next sentence—which begins the following chapter—Esther informs her readers that she is switching stories: "I proceed to other passages of my narrative," a line which she repeats exactly. The reader is completely denied any reaction, on the part of Esther or others, to Lady Dedlock's death. The narrative has spent itself in the search for the mother only to be disappointed. Lady Dedlock was set up as the source of meaning, and, as such, she should have provided understanding and conclusion. Lady Dedlock, of course, offers anything but closure. Instead she opens up a void that is absolutely opposed to conclusion. In her refusal to provide answers, Lady Dedlock denies the very possibility of ending. And thus her story cannot be concluded. The narrative is forced to switch gears, leaving the gap as it is.

The "other passages of [her] narrative" that Esther refers to here are insistently overdetermined by the marriage plot. In the face of the instability generated by Lady Dedlock, the narrative turns to marriage, the default ending for the Victorian novel, in a final attempt at conclusion and stability. The incredible investment in the marriage plot in the final fifty pages of *Bleak House* demonstrates the danger of that instability. Esther is the center of no less than three possible marriages plots in the course of a mere fifty pages: Jarndyce, Guppy, and Woodcourt all stand as possible suitors.

Even Esther is surprised by the speed at which the flurry of marriage plots follows her mother's death. In the second paragraph of the chapter that follows Lady Dedlock's death, Esther explains that "During the time of my illness, we were still in London, where Mrs. Woodcourt had come, on my guardian's invitation" (714). Jarndyce immediately attempts to fill the space left by Lady Dedlock with Mrs. Woodcourt. Although Mrs. Woodcourt does end up as mother-in-law, it is hard to imagine her as an actual maternal figure. Instead, Mrs. Woodcourt represents her son—he is the figure with which

Jarndyce will try to fill the void in *Bleak House*. When Jarndyce asks Esther how she “like[s]” Mrs. Woodcourt, Esther is startled by this “oddly abrupt” question (716), just as her readers have been startled by the “oddly abrupt” narrative switch.

Accomplishing the marriage plot puts quite a strain on the narrative of *Bleak House*. Dickens creates a near-author figure in John Jarndyce, who literally plots Esther’s marriage behind her back. The instability and disappointment that underlie the ending of *Bleak House* make it necessary for Jarndyce to replace Bucket as an all-powerful character in order to fit the remaining characters into their allegedly stable spaces. That effort mirrors Esther’s efforts throughout the novel, particularly as designated by the title of Chapter 8, “Covering a Multitude of Sins.” In that chapter, Esther assumes her position as housekeeper, taking care of both the family at *Bleak House* and the extended family of St. Albans, including the “dead baby,” whom she covers with her handkerchief. The final chapter of *Bleak House* functions like that handkerchief: the marriage of Esther and Woodcourt can only cover over the void left by Lady Dedlock.

A great number of critics have discussed the strangeness of the ending of *Bleak House*, but I suspect that part of that strangeness, at least, comes from a feeling of narrative desperation. *Bleak House* must end, but it has told a story that denies endings. And despite the sense of tidy harmony that fills the final chapter, the novel ultimately refuses finality. Esther, famously, ends her narrative (and thus the novel) with a dash.¹⁴ In *Daniel Deronda*, this uneasiness in the face of closure becomes even more pronounced.

14 Luann Fletcher gives Esther credit for this ending, claiming that “Esther’s narrative and conclusion avoid assuming the fiction of definitive meaning” and that “her uncertainty and open-endedness suggests that her character at least cannot be known in all its essentials, nor morally pinned down” (82, 83).

CHAPTER 3

“DO YOU LIKE UNCERTAINTY?”: RESISTING ENDS IN *DANIEL DERONDA*

George Eliot's last novel has long drawn attention for its unexpected narrative structure. Debate over whether *Daniel Deronda* is one novel or two is a standard of the critical tradition. F. R. Leavis's oft-quoted claim that “As for the bad part [the parts of the plot dealing with Daniel Deronda], there is nothing to do but cut it away” (122) has been followed by a flurry of criticism attempting to prove all of the many different ways that the plots *are* connected. I sympathize strongly with this critical impulse to connect. I, too, believe that the two plots have powerful thematic connections. But despite my desire to address this novel as a whole, with “everything in the book . . . related to everything else” (Eliot *Letters* 475), I must admit that my fascination with mystery mother plots has caused me to be largely engaged with what is often designated “the Jewish plot.” Although I hope to show that Gwendolen and the Princess Halm-Eberstein infuse *Daniel Deronda* with similar narrative tensions, the story of Deronda and his mother will be central to my analysis. I will follow Carolyn Dever, who maintains that “the Princess is a central and critical presence in the text: as the most significant site of resistance and as the most significant site of desire, she is the linch pin among the novel's various plots” (171).

As I have argued, Lady Dedlock occupies a similar position in *Bleak House*. But these characters, of course, function very differently in their respective novels. Lady Dedlock, although she is always a mystery, is literally present throughout the entire narrative. But the Princess only appears for a few chapters, near the novel's close. I will argue, however, that the Princess actually appears early in the novel, when the child Daniel first understands that there is some problem of his birth. Eliot begins

her formal introduction of Deronda in Book II with Deronda's lesson on the loaded word "uncle." So as soon as the reader meets Deronda, we also "meet" his mother. The child feels "the presence of a new guest who seemed to come with an enigmatic veiled face" (167). From this moment on, the tension of "the Jewish plot" centers on the mysterious mother.

The Princess's mysterious absence allows the other characters—and the reader—to spend the novel creating imaginary versions of what she *should* be. In his more hopeful moments, Daniel envisions a mother to love, and be loved by, in "long vistas of affectionate imagination" (640). Ezra Cohen, in his description of the Jewish woman, also highlights the importance of maternity and affection: "a woman has to thank God that He has made her according to His will. And we all know what He has made her—a child-bearing, tender-hearted thing is the woman of our people" (575). The Princess Halm-Eberstein occupies two highly loaded positions: Jew and mother. And so, as in *Bleak House*, the narrative piles meaning upon meaning on the Princess. As mother, the narrative expects her to answer basic questions of identity, and—particularly in this novel—questions of human relations and sympathy. Daniel clearly desires a mother with whom he can connect emotionally. And as a Jew, the Princess is the "makeshift link" (631), the woman who can grant Deronda his Jewishness, and thus his life mission. *Daniel Deronda*—both character and novel—sets the Princess up as answer to questions of the past and the future, of history, origin, ethnicity, religion, and identity. But the Princess, when she does appear, takes violent issue with these expectations: "To have a pattern cut out—'this is a Jewish woman; this is what you must be; this is what you are wanted for, a woman's heart must be of such size and no larger, else it must be pressed small, like Chinese feet; their happiness is to be made as cakes are, by a fixed receipt'" (631). The Princess refuses such a position, and her refusal to play her given social role (in order to play roles of her own) supplies the opening problem that then allows for the

production of narrative. The Princess supplies Miller's "'narratable': the instance[] of disequilibrium, suspense, and general insufficiency from which a given narrative appears to arise" (*Narrative* ix).

But Eliot's novel does not literally begin with Daniel's missing mother. The first book of *Daniel Deronda* follows Gwendolen Harleth instead. I will maintain that the tension infused into the novel by the Princess's refusal to be the mother is ultimately the same tension that Gwendolen brings to *Daniel Deronda*. As Eileen Sypher points out, connections between Gwendolen and the Princess are numerous: She is "what Gwendolen could have been had she followed her earlier dreams. She is the actress Gwendolen hoped to be before she chose marriage as her career. She has fulfilled Gwendolen's abandoned dream of going her own way, as she has lived 'out the life that was in me' without being 'hampered with other lives'" (520). In the early chapters of *Daniel Deronda*, however, Gwendolen has not given up on her dream of independence. The suspense of the novel's opening stems from Gwendolen's attempt at avoiding marriage.

Gwendolen and the Princess serve similar roles in the narrative: they both provide suspense through attempts to "do what they like" (69), particularly when that desire is directly opposed to social—and narrative—expectations. In *Daniel Deronda*, several of the female characters resist filling expected social positions; they refuse to participate in the expected story of "a woman's life," whether that means wife, mother, or both. The Princess, for example, refuses to be her father's version of the ideal Jewish woman. Throughout *Daniel Deronda*, female characters are often asked to fill impossibly idealized positions. Perhaps, since in this novel the expected position is an impossible one, transgression is, to some extent, a necessary aspect of every woman's life. Gwendolen recognizes this problem when she meets Lydia Glasher (the one literally fallen woman of the novel): "it was as if some ghastly vision had come to her in a dream and said, 'I am a woman's life'" (152). Transgression is not a rarity in

Daniel Deronda. For my purposes, the important thing about transgression in terms of narratology is that it provides the space for narrative. By staying out of their expected positions, transgressive characters open up the narrative space. This tension is particularly clear when these characters encounter marriage. Gwendolen, the Princess, and even Lydia Glasher keep the narrative going by refusing the expected narrative: the marriage plot.

We meet Gwendolen at Leobronn, where she is, as we discover later, fleeing a possible proposal. Gwendolen's gambling is, to some extent, an economic alternative to marriage. Her attempted rejection of the marriage plot may be one of the reasons that Deronda finds Gwendolen so unsettling: "Was the good or the evil genius dominant in those beams? Probably the evil; else why was the effect that of *unrest* rather than of undisturbed charm?" (7 *my italics*). Here, Deronda's perception of Gwendolen's "unrest" is literally the unrest that begins Eliot's novel. Gwendolen's enigmatic character is the mystery that makes a space for narrative.

According to the tradition of the novel, we, as readers, must expect Gwendolen's story to end in marriage. Throughout *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot plays on the fact that marriage, in a novel, often signals the ending. Gwendolen feels that she must resist marriage because that is the only way to keep herself—and the narrative—alive. As Gwendolen complains to her mother, "what is the use of my being charming, if it is to end in my being dull and not minding anything? Is that what marriage always comes to?" (29). The danger of marriage here is that it will be an "end." Gwendolen's "thoughts never dwelt on marriage as the fulfillment of her ambition; the dramas in which she imagined herself a heroine were not wrought up to that close" (39).

In her resistance to marriage here, Gwendolen is doubly transgressive. She is socially transgressive in that she refuses the expected path for a woman of her position in Victorian society, but

she also transgresses against the expectations of the novel. As any reader of novels knows, marriage is the trope for closure. But, paradoxically, narrative can only survive as long as marriage is avoided. So Gwendolen maintains narrative by her very attempt at refusing its expectations. When Grandcourt attempts to corner Gwendolen into receiving a proposal, the parallels between courtship and narrative become even more pronounced: “Having come close to accepting Grandcourt, Gwendolen felt this lot of un hoped-for fulness rounding itself too definitely: when we take to wishing a great deal for ourselves, whatever we get soon turns into mere limitation and exclusion” (146). Here, Eliot addresses the very problem of narrative: closure must necessarily mean “limitation and exclusion.” I will argue, ultimately, that the crises of Book VII—particularly Daniel’s confrontation with his mother—serve to deny the possibility of ending, and, by so doing, escape these problems of limitation.

Lydia Glasher also maintains a fraught, resistant relationship to marriage, particularly marriage as closure. When we meet Lydia, ensconced in her role as the mother of Grandcourt’s illegitimate children, it has been “full ten years since the elopement of an Irish officer’s beautiful wife” and everyone who knew her before suspects that “a woman who was understood to have forsaken her child along with her husband had probably sunk lower” (340). So despite the fact that the Lydia Glasher who occupies the narrative of *Daniel Deronda* is very much a mother who is desperately seeking marriage, it is important to remember that in a different story she refused both the roles of “wife” and “mother.” The Princess Halm-Eberstein is, of course, powerfully resistant to the role of mother, but she also attempted (like Gwendolen) to avoid the role of wife. As she tells her son, “I wanted not to marry. I thought of all plans to resist it, but at last I found that I could rule my cousin, and I consented. My father died three weeks after we were married, and then I had my way!” (633). For the Princess, this marriage is a means to an end, rather than an end.

Gwendolen's passionate determination to resist marriage is first let loose on Rex, who finds his advances met with Gwendolen's fierce mandate: "Pray don't make love to me! I hate it" (81). As she admits to her mother later, Gwendolen bitterly maintains that she "shall never love anybody. I can't love people. I hate them" (82). Gwendolen's lack of affection here marks her as a strange other in her social world—as she knows. If her life is to be defined by marriage, Gwendolen's resistance to that path leaves her with little else: "Oh, mama, what is to become of my life? there is nothing worth living for!" (82). The Princess is similarly resistant to affection, as she tells her son: "I had not much affection to give you. I did not want affection. I had been stifled with it" (626).

As the Princess herself notes, this lack of desire for affection is often seen as monstrous: "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" (628). Throughout *Daniel Deronda*, Gwendolen and the Princess are marked by "monstrous" imagery. In the opening chapter, Gwendolen is described as a "serpent," and a "Lamia" (12). Gwendolen's "other-ness" is clear from the beginning. The Lamia reference is particularly interesting, given the fact that Deronda describes his mother as "a Melusina," another serpent-woman. George Eliot is clearly playing on the long history (back to Spenser's Error and further) of images of the "evil woman." Importantly, these images are all framed in terms of the reactions of others to these characters. Gwendolen's position as "other" comes from those who watch her: "the undefinable stinging quality—as it were a trace of demon ancestry—which made some beholders hesitate in their admiration of Gwendolen" (68). Serpent imagery also links Gwendolen and the Princess to the "fallen" Lydia Glasher. Lydia's poison marks her as serpent-like; her "withheld sting was gathering venom" (341). Gwendolen makes the connection complete, when, she asks an imagined Lydia, "Why did you put your fangs into me and not into him?" (448).

And, of course, the step from “monstrosity” to “madness” is a common one in portrayals of women.¹⁵ But, importantly, the descriptions of Lydia and Gwendolen as “mad” come from a single source: Grandcourt. George Eliot writes her own history of a repressive male patriarchy (as represented most frighteningly by Grandcourt) that defines difficult women as mad. When Lydia threatens to attend his wedding, Grandcourt tells her that “if you like, you can play the mad woman” (350). When Lydia unleashes her “venom” on Gwendolen, Grandcourt can only understand her reaction as madness: “He saw her pallid, shrieking as it seemed with terror, the jewels scattered around her on the floor. Was it a fit of madness?” (359). In his punishment of Gwendolen for wearing the necklace Deronda returned to her, Grandcourt almost repeats his words to Lydia when he asks Gwendolen to “Oblige me in future by not showing whims like a mad woman in a play” (446). Gwendolen cannot speak or move in response: “She could not even make a passionate exclamation, or throw up her arms . . . The sense of his scorn kept her still” (448). Grandcourt’s danger consists of his ability to impose paralyzing definitions upon the women in his life.

In that sense, Grandcourt is similar to the Princess’s father, who would have put her “in a frame” to be “tortured” (662). She remembers wishing “I could have defied him openly; but I never could. It was what I could not imagine” (632). And, of course, the Princess is there somehow every time Grandcourt refers to “the play.” She is the actress. The many connections between Gwendolen, Lydia, and the Princess suggest that their work in the text is similar. They are all the “other” woman who maintains the space of narrative by resisting social expectations.

15 See Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*.

Importantly, it is this seeming “monstrosity” that provides the space for narrative. The transgressive women of Eliot’s novel—Gwendolen, Lydia Glasher, and the Princess—furnish the story. As Brooks points out, “Deviance is the very condition for life to be ‘narratable’: the state of normality is devoid of interest, energy, and the possibility for narration” (139). These three women are very different from Mirah, at least according to Mrs. Meyrick: “It is not in her nature to run into planning and devising: only to submit. See how she submitted to that father. It was a wonder to herself how she found the will and contrivance to run away from him” (224). Mirah does still have a narrative of her own, but Mrs. Meyrick’s emphasis on agency here is important. The more active female characters in *Daniel Deronda* are the transgressive ones.

The Princess, Gwendolen, and Lydia are all de-stabilizing forces in the text. As Eileen Sypher notes, Eliot’s portrayal of Gwendolen

surreptitiously challenges prevailing nineteenth-century notions . . . of the ultimate *knowability* and *fixability* of character and so the ability of that character to be successfully interpellated into the dominant ideology . . . As Gillian Beer observes, the novel refuses to “recount” Gwendolen. Instead, Gwendolen emerges as an enigma—at times an amalgam of different, often contradictory characteristics and behaviors, at other times a cipher, an unknown, whose unmapped regions occupy center stage. (508-509)

This description could apply equally well to the Princess. She remains an “unknown,” even after Daniel meets her.

The Princess’s status as un-knowable is particularly problematic for the narrative because Deronda’s story has been driven largely by the belief that the mother will grant meaning. The mystery of Deronda’s origin has provided the space for narrative—it seems only logical that the close of that

narrative would answer the questions and solve the mystery. The extent of Daniel's investment in the possible discovery of his mother is clear from the fact that he looks to her not only for an explanation of the past, but also for a mandate for the future. Deronda hopes that his discovery of his mother will provide him with a life-mission: "The disclosure [of his birth] might bring pain . . . but if it helped him to make his life a sequence which would take the form of duty—if it saved him from having to make an arbitrary selection where he felt no preponderance of desire?" (468).

Here, Deronda is wondering about the very real, practical questions of race and social position. But Daniel's desire for explanation in the form of his mother is not solely limited to this field. For Deronda, the questions of maternity are so crucial that he raises them to spiritual status. As the narrator explains, "To Daniel the words Father and Mother had the altar-fire in them; and the thought of all the closest relations of our nature had still something of the mystic power which had made his neck and ears burn in boyhood" (469). And after the traumatic meeting with his mother, the narrator compares Deronda's state of mind to that of a disappointed pilgrim: "to Deronda's nature the moment was cruel; it made the filial yearning of his life a disappointed pilgrimage to a shrine where there were no longer the symbols of sacredness" (660).

Deronda's meeting with his mother is disturbing—both to him and to the structure of the novel—because he makes "symbols of sacredness" out of his parentage. Daniel can hardly believe in the reality of the woman he meets because of the depth of his investment in his own, imagined version of his mother: "he had lived through so many ideal meetings with his mother, and they had seemed more real than this!" (625). The problem, though, is that the Princess is much *too* real. Her reality threatens her son because the Princess will not be the signified to match the signifier "mother." She refuses to be the symbol that her son is searching for. Dever addresses this problem in terms of psychoanalytic

object-relations theory. She explains that “it is precisely the mother-as-thing that structures Daniel’s economy of desire. A true child of object-relations, Daniel seeks a “good object” . . . from whom he can construct an identity. But the threat of objectification is the greatest dread of Gwendolen and the Princess, and Daniel’s drive to self-construction entails the objectification of women” (167). The Princess hopes to elude that objectification. As she tells her son on their first meeting (triumphantly, perhaps), “I am not like what you thought I was” (625). And Daniel is horrified by the gulf between what he expected and what he meets. That gulf, as we have seen, is the very space of narratibility. It is the distance between the space of the transgressive woman and the space she “should” occupy in society. It is partly the very unexpected-ness of the Princess that locates her as a source of instability—she provides questions rather than answers. As Dierdre David notes, “for all his androgynous sympathy, [Deronda] cannot understand his mother” (171). And Natalie J. McKnight agrees: “even after they’ve met, she remains an enigma that he needs to search and explore” (131).

The Princess threatens both Daniel and the narrative because the readers, like Daniel, expect her to occupy the relative position of mother. In our experience of the novel, Daniel has been central,¹⁶ and we expect to deal with the Princess only in terms of her relationship with her son. The Princess upsets all of our—and Deronda’s—expectations by seeing herself (not her son) as primary. For the Princess, the role of mother is just one aspect of her life—one that she has attempted to refuse completely. Deronda may be attempting to articulate this feeling when, on first meeting his mother, he describes her “worn beauty” as having “a strangeness in it as if she were not quite a human mother, but a Melusina, who had ties with some other world which is independent of ours” (625). Here, with the

16 Deronda has been central to his storyline at least. Eliot profoundly complicates our sense of “main character” or “protagonist” in this novel.

reference to a serpent-woman, Deronda employs a fairly traditional trope of the woman as “other” to describe his mother. But I am more interested by the suggestion that the Princess is somehow “independent” of “our” world: the world of the reader, where Deronda reigns supreme as the central character of his text. That possibility profoundly destabilizes both Daniel and the text itself. The threat of the Princess is the threat of another world, or another narrative, a new space in which she is central to her own story, not playing the role of mother to someone else.¹⁷ As the Princess herself explains, she “wanted to live out the life that was in me, and not to be hampered with other lives” (626).

The Princess thus destabilizes the narrative because she insists on a new narrative—her own. She refuses to fit into her given space in Deronda’s search for origins. Instead of offering the meaning and closure that readers and Daniel alike expected from the discovery of the mother, the Princess offers openings, beginnings, mysteries, and more questions. Instead of finding the end of one narrative, we find an entirely new narrative, complete with its own questions and mysteries. What is the Princess’s story? What is her history? What are her origins? The Princess does not offer narrative stability—she opens a new textual space instead. Daniel finds questions instead of answers, and a beginning instead of an ending.

But, as many would argue, the Princess provides the answer to the most important question: Daniel Deronda is, indeed, Jewish. But just as she grants Deronda his heritage, the Princess simultaneously denies it, by denying Judaism as a whole. Instead of serving as the “makeshift link” (631), the Princess proves to be a powerfully de-stabilizing force in the chain of patriarchal, historical

¹⁷ Dever notes that Gwendolen is engaged in the same struggle: “for Gwendolen and the Princess, the threat of objectification is a menace; the fact that each of these women possesses a strong desire to perform and to sing underscores the need to control the terms of self-representation, and this entails resistance to those structures of objectification and identification—most perniciously here marriage and motherhood—that society would have them occupy” (167).

transmission. The Princess forces her son (and the reader) to listen to her version of Judaism, in which her father

only thought of fettering me into obedience. I was to be what he called ‘the Jewish woman’ under pain of his curse . . . I was to feel awe for the bit of parchment in the *mezuzah* over the door, to dread lest a bit of butter should touch a bit of meat; to think it beautiful that men should bind the *tephillin* on them, and women not,—to adore the wisdom of such laws, however silly they might seem to me. (630)

What does it mean that the character who is most important to establishing Deronda’s identity as a Jew is also the character who is most violently opposed to Judaism? Throughout the novel, various characters have criticized Judaism, but with condescension and ignorance, rather than with the passionate scorn and intimate knowledge the Princess injects into the narrative.

The solution—the way to make the Princess fulfill her role as makeshift link—is to assume that she doesn’t know what she is talking about. But as the Princess points out, she is much more experienced in the life of Judaism than Deronda: “Ah! . . . you are glad to have been born a Jew. You say so. That is because you have not been brought up as a Jew. That separateness seems sweet to you because I saved you from it” (631). The Princess makes the same point about Mirah: “Ah! like you. She is attached to the Judaism she knows nothing of” (665). The Princess’s point is a good one. She *has* been raised a Jew, and by the strictly practicing, religiously devoted Daniel Charisi. So even as the Princess provides an answer to Daniel’s questions about his religious origins, she simultaneously undermines Judaism as a whole.

Several critics have maintained that the text nullifies the Princess’s rebellion because Deronda chooses the path of his father and ignores the anti-Judaism of his mother. In *Fictions of Resolution*,

Dierdre David explains that Deronda “undoes all that she [the Princess] has exerted her will to effect . . . he implicitly renounces his mother by committing himself to Mordecai’s philosophy of separateness with communication” (146). Tony Jackson agrees: “Daniel’s return to his monumental mother ends in a return to Mordecai, that is, to the domineering patriarch and the patriarchal religion against which the Princess has rebelled as if from slavery” (59).

But my interest here is not so much in Daniel’s reaction as in the reaction of the reader. It seems clear that Daniel does embrace Judaism wholeheartedly, despite his mother’s reservations. But the question, for me, is whether or not the reader can believe in Deronda’s mission. In terms of plot, the Princess allows Deronda to take on his Jewish quest. She grants him his Jewishness, and although I’m not sure I would agree with David’s claim that “For Deronda, to know that he is Jewish means a termination of all his intellectual doubt and psychological uneasiness, of all that has bothered him throughout the novel” (202), it is certainly true that Deronda has a direction, literally, by the novel’s close. But just because Deronda is resistant to the instability that the Princess represents does not mean that the reader is equally resistant. The force of the Princess’s angry, eloquent language is such that she makes a major impression on the narrative. She is an explosive character, and George Eliot has written her in such a way that she simply cannot be forgotten or side-lined by the reader, despite Daniel Deronda’s attempt to do just that.

My reading of the Princess as a de-stabilizing force is strongly opposed by several critics who have been disappointed by the “neatness” of Daniel Deronda’s search for origins. As Cynthia Chase points out, the revelation of Deronda’s Jewishness comes as no surprise: “Deronda’s demonstrated empathy with Judaic tradition makes the disclosure of his Jewish birth seem either superfluous or implausibly neat” (223). And Robin Riley Fast claims that the Deronda plot “remains a straight progress

through repeatedly reinforced foreshadowings to their ultimate, expected confirmation” (203). But if we take the Princess seriously—what she says, rather than just her Jewishness—she single-handedly upsets the problematic “neatness” of Deronda’s search for origins. Eliot may, in fact, deploy the Princess partly for that end. She provides instability and open-ness in a search for origins plot that threatens to become too closed.

Daniel’s emotional confrontation with his mother is paired (by its position in the narrative) with the other most explosive event of *Daniel Deronda*: the death of Grandcourt. So in a single space (both the space of Book VII and the space of the hotel Italia), Deronda is forced to confront the two most explosive women—and events—of the narrative. By combining them both in terms of narrative placement and location, George Eliot forces her readers to address these two events simultaneously. These narrative structures are, indeed, connected. *Daniel Deronda*’s narrative is fueled by the transgressive woman, and in these crises scenes, we see both the Princess and Gwendolen at their most transgressive. While both of these events pretend at closure, they both actually only grant the instability that will fuel more narrative.

A great deal of the narrative tension that maintains Gwendolen’s plot after her marriage stems from the desire—both Gwendolen’s and the reader’s—for escape from her oppressive marriage. But when Gwendolen achieves that escape from marriage through Grandcourt’s death, she finds horror instead of freedom. Gwendolen is faced by the specter of “a dead face—I shall never get away from it” (689). Gwendolen cannot escape Grandcourt’s dead face, and neither can the reader. The novel’s close is haunted by Grandcourt’s face, Gwendolen’s horror, and the Princess’s rebellion. None of these events are resolved in the hundred-page finale that follows.

The novel cannot “close” these events because they are ultimately very much “the narratable.” These events infuse the novel with instability and the unknown—neither of which is necessarily a bad thing. But a novel must end. And so the novel shifts gears, hoping to find, in the default marriage plot, an opportunity for closure. Book VII ends with trauma and loss, with Daniel in the aftermath of his confrontation with the Princess and Gwendolen in the aftermath of a wished-for death come true. In the closing scene, Gwendolen sinks “on her knees, in hysterical crying. The distance between them [she and Deronda] was too great” (702). That moment is followed by an absolute gap in the text. Instead of Book VII beginning with an attempt at resolving those problems, the reader finds him or herself on an entirely new track with the opening of Book VIII. Instantaneously, we are transported back to England.

Eliot opens Book VIII with a prolonged musing by the narrator on the varied pace of life in different situations. She contrasts the events of Gwendolen’s recent experience with her home where the past year “had left her family in Pennicote without deeper change than that of some outward habits, and some adjustment of prospects and intentions . . . The Rectory was as pleasant a home as before” (705). The tone of these opening paragraphs is quiet and thoughtful—vastly different from the intensity that characterizes Book VII. The sudden reversion to the “quiet trotting of time” (707) at the Rectory and Offendene is striking. Eliot does address the sudden change, noting the contrast between “the revolutionary rush of change which makes a new inner and outer life, to that quiet recurrence of the familiar, which has no other epochs than those of hunger and the heavens” (705). But the fact that Eliot addresses the contrast does not make it any less strange.

This strange, jerky transition marks a wrenching shift in the narrative. The events of Book VII—especially Daniel’s confrontation with his mother—open up a void that then appears, quite

literally, on the blank space that separates Book VII from Book VIII. Since those crises offer no closure, the narrative is forced to seek it elsewhere. Although Deronda's mother has provided the tension of his narrative, readers are asked to be satisfied with closure in the form of unions with Mordecai and Mirah. Of course, there is no new marriage for Gwendolen, although the strange re-introduction of Rex may be a gesture in that direction.

The last hundred pages of the novel have a strange, dream-like feeling. To some extent, there is little more for the reader to learn. Tension is gone—we know that Daniel and Mirah will marry and that Daniel will take on Mordecai's mission. We, as readers, worry over Gwendolen, but with the official stamp of Deronda's Jewishness even the most hopeful readers must admit that the possibility of a marriage between Gwendolen and Daniel is highly unlikely. Book VIII attempts resolution and reconciliation, but those goals seem impossible in the emptied-out, unreal world that Gwendolen and Daniel return to. The half-attempts at closure feel so strange because they are built on the void that opens up when Daniel finds his mother.

The narrator's description of Gwendolen's travels back to England is telling: "There was a dreamy, sunny stillness over the hedgeless fields . . . and to Gwendolen the talk within the carriage seemed only to make the dreamland larger with an indistinct region of coal-pits and a purgatorial Gadsmere which she would never visit"(761). While the other passengers talk, Gwendolen sits by "like one who had visited the spiritworld and was full to the lips of an unutterable experience that threw a strange unreality over all the talk she was hearing" (762-3). Eliot's description of Gwendolen's state of mind here could be applied to last sections of the novel. The "unutterable experience[s]" of Book VII "thr[o]w a strange unreality" over the attempt at finality that is Book VIII. The problem with Book VIII is largely, I think, the problem of disbelief. We, as readers, cannot believe in the world or events of the

final hundred pages because we can no longer believe in endings. Like Gwendolen and Daniel, we are still reeling from the destabilizing, explosive events of Book VII.

Daniel's reaction to his home is strangely similar to Gwendolen's:

Daniel walked about this room [the back drawing room at the Abbey], which he had for years known by heart, with a strange sense of metamorphosis in his own life. The familiar objects around him . . . seemed almost to belong to a previous state of existence which he was revisiting in memory only, not in reality; so deep and transforming had been the impressions he had lately experienced. (766)

Again, "reality" seems to somehow be missing, as though it had been lived through already, and the world of Book VIII were that of a dream-like afterlife. Gwendolen and Daniel both chart the impact of the "transforming" experiences of Book VII. They, like the readers, are at a loss to deal with the new world that exists in the aftermath of the Book VII explosions.

Ultimately, the last one hundred pages of *Daniel Deronda* do little more than gesture at a traditional, well-knit ending. Several critics have noted the lack of closure in *Daniel Deronda*. For Jackson, the ending marks the novel's innovative, modernist tendencies: "the relatively open endings move away from a tight adherence to notions of organic form" (47). For Joseph Allen Boone, the openness of the end offers a critique of marriage. And Sypher is worried by "the disturbing aspects" of "the ending's open-endedness" (521). Eliot allows her novel to remain largely in the space of instability created by Daniel's confrontation with his mother. Gwendolen remains unmarried at the novel's close—a major departure from expectations of the Victorian novel. And although Daniel marries, "he take[s] off for foreign parts with someone other than the heroine for his bride" (David 136). For David, Eliot's denial of "the gratifying 'closure' which is common to much of nineteenth-century fiction" (136)

produces a “sterile and celibate ending” (203). Sypher would agree, claiming that *Daniel Deronda* “ends in a terrible stillness” (521).

I disagree with David and Sypher here. Although it is certainly true that the close of Eliot’s final novel is anything but “gratifying”—I think it could be called downright unsettling—I wonder if there is a way to see the strange nature of the ending as a concession to the instability of narrative. In *Daniel Deronda*, the narrative attempts at closure, but ultimately that effort is an impossible one. After the events of Book VII, there can be no ending. If the mother, as the literal point of origin, cannot provide conclusive, fulfilling answers, then perhaps those answers are not to be found. And perhaps endings, as such, are not ultimately desirable. In the early stages of *Daniel Deronda*, Grandcourt, in an attempt to corner Gwendolen into a proposal, asks her if she “like[s] uncertainty” (147). With a “playful smile,” Gwendolen replies “I think I do, rather . . . There is more in it” (148).

By the novel’s close, however, Gwendolen’s “playfulness” is a distant memory. It is true that several critics have managed to see the novel’s conclusion in a positive light. Some maintain that *Deronda* serves Gwendolen well by abandoning her, thus forcing her to construct an independent identity. Dever maintains that “it would oversimplify the novel’s real valuation of such crowded feminine spheres as Offendene and the Meyrick home to read Gwendolen’s return as a defeat” (174). Boone notes that Gwendolen’s “sense of self, not “boxed” into yet another marriage, at least has a chance of recovery, of redefining itself in relation to the openness of the future” (78). I would like to agree with Boone, and revel in the instability and openness that the text has created. But I acknowledge that any attempt to see Gwendolen as triumphant in the final pages is impossible. I would like to propose another possibility.

As we have seen, the novel *Daniel Deronda* is opposed to endings. The impact of the Princess is such that the novel can no longer posit closure as a realistic possibility. And so Daniel is sent off on his mission and Gwendolen is left with no marriage, no plan, and open to the future. And although I would like to see her as hopeful, as Sypher notes, “It is not at all clear that the “new soul” Deronda helped cultivate in her has any usefulness in her new life . . . Gwendolen is neither a successful figure of action in a new social world, nor a serene, self-contained figure in an alternative domestic arena” (521). Perhaps Gwendolen is ultimately sacrificed to *Daniel Deronda*’s refusal to end. She is left hanging because she is in a novel that will not grant her a conclusion.

I do not want to claim here that *Daniel Deronda* ends in a joyous acceptance of instability. Instead, the novel demonstrates that there is nothing easy about refusing narrative ends. Indeed, the attempt to resist conclusion is painful, heart wrenching, even tortuous. Ultimately, though, this novel agrees with Gwendolen’s earlier claim about “uncertainty.” There is simply “more to” unresolved narrative, and *Daniel Deronda* cannot bear to end. But the novel also demonstrates that there is nothing “playful” about uncertainty. In leaving Gwendolen free from another stifling marriage, Eliot is forced to leave her deeply, tragically, alone.

CHAPTER 4

AFTERWORD

Lady Dedlock and the Princess Halm-Eberstein powerfully affect their respective narratives, in strange and unexpected ways. Throughout this thesis, and in the pages that follow, I am attempting to articulate the inordinately complex narrative positions these characters occupy in *Bleak House* and *Daniel Deronda*, narrative positions which shift as the novels progress.

For most of these two narratives, Lady Dedlock and the Princess are subject to complete oversignification. Their mysterious, absent status allows them to become idealized objects who are expected to answer the many questions of the texts. In fact, both characters become so important to their narratives that they gain near-religious status. Lady Dedlock is

always the same exhausted deity, surrounded by worshippers, and terribly liable to be bored to death, even when presiding at her own shrine. Mr. Tulkinghorn is always the same speechless repository of noble confidences . . . But whether each evermore watches and suspects the other . . . what each would give to know how much the other knows—all this is hidden, for the time, in their own hearts” (150). The

narrator’s tone is partly tongue-in-cheek here, but Lady Dedlock certainly does “preside” over the narrative of *Bleak House*. Despite her seeming power, however, she is also the object of Tulkinghorn’s inquiring gaze. Ultimately, it is Lady Dedlock’s *secret*—the secret of maternity—that gives her such deified status in the narrative. In Eliot’s novel, Daniel Deronda’s confrontation with his mother makes “the filial yearning of his life a disappointed pilgrimage to a shrine where there were no longer the

symbols of sacredness” (660). Both *Bleak House* and *Daniel Deronda* become largely a search for this idealized, symbolic mother. The texts pile meaning after meaning onto these characters, to the point that the maintenance of those meanings is simply impossible. When protagonists and readers alike confront Lady Dedlock and the Princess, that precarious idealization is completely uprooted. These characters do not perform their expected narrative work—providing answers. Instead, they refuse the loaded, symbolic role of mother that the text attempts to assign them, a refusal that is strangely doubled in these texts.

When Esther and Daniel confront their mothers, they find the residue of an earlier rejection. The Princess’s was deliberate, as she informs Daniel “I did not want a child . . . I was glad to be freed from you” (626, 628), while Lady Dedlock’s position is more ambivalent. Dickens partly exonerates her because she believes her infant has died: “O my child, my child! Not dead in the first hours of her life, as my cruel sister told me” (364). Even without her sister’s deception, though, Lady Dedlock had already refused the space of the “proper” Victorian mother by having a sexual experience outside of marriage. Interestingly, these early rejections of their infant children—which pre-date the chronology of the narratives—are only repeated when the missing mothers are discovered.

Daniel is very aware of this disturbing repetition: “You renounced me—you still banish me—as a son” (663). While the initial abandonments of Esther and Daniel provided the mysteries that fuel both *Bleak House* and *Daniel Deronda*, the later rejections—which leave Daniel disillusioned in Italy and Esther alone in the woods—profoundly destabilize the text. Lady Dedlock and the Princess refuse to play the part of mother, and, in so doing, displace Esther and Daniel, neither of whom can be a good child without a cooperative maternal object.

Both Esther and Daniel wish to be good children to their re-found mothers, a wish that is articulated as a desire to help. Esther explains as much to Lady Dedlock: “I told her that my heart overflowed with love for her; that it was natural love . . . That it was not for me . . . to take her to account for having given me life; but that my duty was to bless her and receive her, though the whole world turned from her, and that I only asked her leave to do it” (449). Lady Dedlock refuses that request. She insists that, “I must travel my dark road alone” (450) and traces out her own path through the novel, independent of Esther’s existence. As Esther explains, “She had put herself beyond all hope, and beyond all help” (450). Lady Dedlock has “put herself beyond” Esther’s “hope” and “help,” and beyond her relationship with her child. Daniel Deronda tells the Princess, “I used to think that you might be suffering . . . I used to wish that I could be a comfort to you” (625). And later, “in his most fervent tone,” he asks his mother to “Take my affection” (634). But she refuses, explaining that “It is better so. We must part again soon, and you owe me no duties” (634).

Both Esther and Daniel seem to feel that it is their duty as children to love and comfort their mothers. Daniel reminds his mother, “‘If you had needed anything I would have worked for you,’ said Deronda, conscious of a disappointed yearning—a shutting out for ever from long vistas of affectionate imagination” (640). In refusing to allow that affection, these two mothers displace their children by not allowing them to occupy the desired space of affectionate child. Both Esther and Daniel are faced with “the pain of repulsed tenderness” (Eliot 634). Although I’ve been focused throughout on the ways these mothers disrupt patterns of meaning and identity, it is certainly also the case that they disrupt expected patterns of affection.

Lady Dedlock and the Princess decenter their children by refusing to let them be affectionate, but they also literally displace them by insisting on the existence of new families in which there is no

space for the newly-recovered child. When Daniel asks his mother, “Is it not possible that I could be near you often and comfort you?” she replies, “No, not possible . . . I have a husband and five children. None of them know of your existence” (639). The Princess forces Daniel to face the existence of another family—an entire group of people who do not know he exists. Similarly, Lady Dedlock refuses to let Esther accept her because of Sir Leicester: “I must keep this secret, if by any means it can be kept, not wholly for myself. I have a husband, wretched and dishonouring creature that I am!” (450). Sir Leicester must be protected precisely *because* he does not know that a daughter exists. The impact on Esther is powerful—when faced (among other things) with those who do not know of her existence, she begins to doubt the very value of that existence: “I was so confused and shaken, as to be possessed by a belief that it was right, and had been intended, that I should die in my birth; and that it was wrong, and not intended, that I should be alive” (453). As Carolyn Dever notes, “Esther, left by her mother standing on the Ghost’s Walk at Chesney Wold, is at this moment established as a *ghostly* presence, a living absence, within her own autobiography” (84).¹⁸

By not allowing either Esther or Daniel to occupy the space of the child, Lady Dedlock and the Princess profoundly destabilize Esther, Daniel, and the two narratives themselves. Instead of occupying the expected position of mother, Lady Dedlock and the Princess instead re-enter the narrative with stories of their own. They insist on the priority of their own lives, rather than on the priority of their children’s needs. Suddenly, characters who were squarely located as “other” insist on making themselves central. The threat of these mothers is the threat of the other refusing to remain other.

¹⁸In a strange twist, Lady Dedlock and the Princess refuse to recognize their newly-recovered children out of loyalty to current husbands and children. So just as they seem their most transgressive, Lady Dedlock are fulfilling the expectations of other social arenas, in worlds that are independent of our protagonists.

Of course, the psychoanalytic implications are clear. If the mother must be defined as object in order for the child to establish itself as subject, then the return of the mother is particularly dangerous, as Dever explains:

I argue that Victorian novels that represent the *return* of the missing mother after staging her death or disappearance enact subversive responses to the social, psychological, and narrative structures consolidated through her loss. The emphasis on the mother's return suggests a challenge to the psychoanalytic models of subjectivity predicated on the ideal of maternal absence, revealing the insistence of maternal embodiment, agency, and subjectivity. (xiii)

These mothers challenge narrative structures by insisting on their own stories. In *Bleak House*, the presence of Lady Dedlock throughout the text greatly threatens Esther's own role as author and main character. The danger is that *Bleak House* might become the story of Lady Dedlock, not Esther. The Princess does not share Lady Dedlock's long-term narrative presence, but in the two explosive chapters where she finally gets to speak, she insists on a new narrative that threatens to undermine the entire trajectory of the novel. The Princess tells a different narrative of Judaism, one in which the sanctity of the religion (with which the novel has been so invested), is reduced to "silly" laws, to "the howling, and the gabbling, and the dreadful fasts, and the tiresome feasts" (630). She also denies the primacy of Daniel's quest to solve the mystery of his origins, as well as his quest for self-definition as a subject.

Of course, Daniel claims to ignore her story, insisting that he and his grandfather will be able to leap over her transgression: "Your will was strong, but my grandfather's trust which you accepted and did not fulfil—what you call his yoke—is the expression of something stronger, with deeper, farther-

spreading roots, knit into the foundations of sacredness for all men” (663). Daniel re-writes his mother’s narrative here; he even redefines her words. But does he succeed in that effort? The Princess is certainly evicted from the narrative, never to reappear, while Daniel heads off on Mordecai’s mission with his own properly Jewish wife.

Similarly, Lady Dedlock is silenced—literally frozen to death—and she too disappears from the narrative. It seems possible to conclude that these two transgressive characters are successfully evicted from their respective texts in order to stabilize the novels’ endings. Christine van Boheemen maintains that Lady Dedlock “functions as the scapegoat. She must die in order to cleans and purify . . . Letting Lady Dedlock live, reconciling her with her husband and daughter, would have opened the floodgates” (123).¹⁹ And Neil Hertz notes that the disappearance of the Princess from the narrative “may be read as an exorcism, a scapegoating after an ambivalent celebration” (112).²⁰ However, I have been claiming all along that these novels never manage to recover from the explosive impact of these mothers, and I maintain that those evictions are unsuccessful. For one thing, the impacts of Lady Dedlock and the Princess on the texts are simply too powerful—they enact such profound instability into these texts that no amount of eviction can secure stability. But I also suspect that eviction from the text is ineffective here because of the complicated relationship these characters have had to absence and presence throughout their respective novels.

The mysteries of *Daniel Deronda* and *Bleak House* both seem to rely on the absence of the mothers. From the beginnings of these two novels, Daniel and Esther do not know their own origins—a

19 I’m simplifying here. Van Boheeman notes that Lay Dedlock’s death is “the fig leaf to shield Victorian eyes from what they know is there,” a move she calls a “curious strategy of concealment and revelation” (123).

20 For Hertz, the eviction of the Princess is part of a larger pattern in which Eliot must evict versions of the female author—versions of herself.

mystery that the text plans to solve. Strangely, though, these mothers are simultaneously present and absent. The Princess may not actually appear as a character for most of the novel, but her impact is felt early on, when Daniel feels “the presence of a new guest who seemed to come with an enigmatic veiled face” (167). Lady Dedlock is particularly interesting in this light, in that, for most of *Bleak House*, she is present in the narrative but absent as Esther’s mother. But even when Esther and Daniel confront their mothers, they somehow remain out of reach. When Daniel is face to face with the Princess, his idealized version of his mother is still nowhere to be found. She is, after all, “not quite a human mother” (625). And Lady Dedlock occupies a strange liminal space for Esther; she is the “living mother who had told me evermore to consider her as dead” (521). Both Lady Dedlock and the Princess are present in their absence and absent in their presence; thus, they cannot be effectively evicted from the text. So despite the disappearance of Lady Dedlock and the Princess from the concluding chapters of *Bleak House* and *Daniel Deronda*, they continue to wreak havoc on any attempt at stability.

Ellen Moers notes of *Bleak House* that “Every woman in the novel, whatever her moral or social role, appears to be in one sense or another a figure of force. This is in part what makes *Bleak House* unusual, and what subtly but pervasively alters the love relationships, tilts the emotional centre, and shifts the masculine point of view of the novel” (16). Part of my project here has been simply to demonstrate the sheer force that Lady Dedlock and the Princess enact on their respective narratives. These characters are absolutely central to these texts; they are the “pivot[s] it all turns on,” to quote Inspector Bucket. The narratives of *Bleak House* and *Daniel Deronda* grant the mystery mothers this priority. Both narratives make the mothers all-important in the hopes that they will solve the central mysteries of meaning and origin. But neither character serves this expected narrative purpose. Instead, in both novels, the mother is a source of profound instability.

Both narratives make the mother central in the hopes that she will provide answers. But when granted so much textual power, these characters react in strange and unexpected ways. While they have been granted centrality as mysterious, absent *mothers*, both characters insist on the primacy of that position while simultaneously refusing the maternal. And so the idealized mother metamorphoses into a deeply unsettling figure—one who instead of stabilizing identity and narrative profoundly destabilizes both.

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