

Equivocal Objects: The Problem of Women's Property in *Daniel Deronda*

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I

In what looks like a typical scene of commodity display and consumption, the eponymous hero of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876) wanders the streets of London in a reluctant search for Mirah's lost mother and brother:

[H]is attention was caught by some fine old clasps in chased silver displayed in the window at his right hand. His first thought was that Lady Mallinger, who had a strictly Protestant taste for such Catholic spoils, might like to have these missal-clasps turned into a bracelet; then his eyes travelled over the other contents of the window, and he saw that the shop was that kind of pawnbroker's where the lead is given to jewellery, lace, and all equivocal objects introduced as *bric-a-brac*.¹

The shop, a distraction from Deronda's quest, leads to an immediate association between the display of bric-a-brac associated with femininity (jewellery and lace) and Lady Mallinger, who had a 'taste' for such 'equivocal objects'. The missal-clasps, once part of the function and decoration of a holy book and subsequently removed and pawned as private property, have the potential to be recycled as an item of jewellery. Like the 'equivocal objects' to which she is attracted, Lady Mallinger is also in a sense an 'equivocal object', for she holds an ambiguous social position and lacks most of the characteristics associated with being a subject under patriarchy. As a married woman, she is not an autonomous property owner and she functions as a conduit facilitating the transmission of property between men, seeing herself as 'a large living sign of her failure' (236) because she 'produced nothing but daughters in a case where sons were required' (192). She gives Sir Hugo only 'makeshift feminine offspring' (611).

This pause in the narrative to describe Lady Mallinger's taste in bric-a-brac is typical of what Emily Apter terms the 'display-case narrative device' used by nineteenth-century novelists to convey the 'reality' of the material world.² Apter's book, *Feminising the Fetish*, highlights the ways in which late nineteenth-century 'bric-a-bracomania' resulted in those 'domestic altars of eroticised things', fetishes which played significant roles in the 'fictions of interiority' of the realist novel (xi). However, explaining objects in literature solely in terms of fetishism, whether Marxist commodity fetishism (whereby commodities appear to exist 'magically'

with no traces of the labour expended on their production), or the Freudian castration complex or penis envy (whereby an object functions as a substitute for the absent phallus), tends to oversimplify the complicated range of cultural and psychic relationships people experience with the material world. Nevertheless, theories of fetishism also offer us useful ways to begin reading the worlds of the realist novel and, as many recent critics have indicated, the literary representations of things can work in a multiplicity of ways and on numerous levels.³ Victorian novelists may ‘clutter’ their novels with the objects of everyday domestic life, yet it does not follow that these constitute what Roland Barthes termed the ‘futile details’ of realist representation.⁴

Certainly, objects in Victorian novels, particularly those associated with women, are abundant and usually significant, from Dickens’s Miss Havisham’s decaying objects from her past, M. E. Braddon’s Lady Audley’s addiction to luxury items, and the precious bric-a-brac Henry James’s Serena Merle uses to shore up her identity.⁵ The representation of things often signals the ambiguities of the female condition and here this process will be explored in one of the richest and most complex of Victorian novels, *Daniel Deronda*, a text that undoubtedly owes something to the fact that its writing and publication took place between the passing of the two Married Women’s Property Acts in 1870 and 1882, a time when the issue of women’s property rights was intensely debated. Eliot began writing the novel in 1873; however, the initial germ for it came in September 1872, when she witnessed a young woman gambling in a German casino.⁶ Although the idea of women desiring money and property was a disturbing one for Eliot, she was also aware of the difficulties of ownership and autonomy that Victorian women so often experienced, along with the occasionally fraught relationships they had with the objects they owned, or thought that they owned. For many married women, ownership of even small personal items was by no means certain. For example, before the passing of the first Married Women’s Property Act, Deronda’s gift of the missal clasps to Lady Mallinger would mean that she could legally own them as her personal property, although if her husband gave her a similar gift, he would retain the rights of ownership. However, if Lady Mallinger chose to steal it back from him, she could do so with impunity.⁷ *Daniel Deronda* dramatically reveals this

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ambiguity, and before I go on to discuss the novel, it will be helpful to consider the complications of the property laws and the reforms that took place before and shortly after Eliot's writing of the novel, as well as examining her own complex relationship to these issues. This particular context helps to explain why she developed a new sort of heroine in Gwendolen Harleth and why she focuses so intently on the material world in which she struggles to survive.

II

Before the passing of the 1870 and 1882 Acts, married women had no independent legal existence under common law, where a wife was termed a *feme covert* or 'covered woman', covered or protected by her husband.⁸ She was not able to retain her own property or earnings, sign a contract or make a will; neither was she responsible for her debts, or even her crimes, if they were committed in her husband's presence.⁹ Yet despite the indignities of this legal denial of selfhood, evidence suggests that for many women, unable to inherit or work for their own living, marriage was preferable to spinsterhood; as Mrs Cadwallader states in *Middlemarch*, it was often 'a necessary economy'¹⁰ which brought some material benefits, such as access to real estate (if not actual ownership of it) and often paraphernalia, such as clothes, jewellery and ornaments.¹¹ The argument presented by those who opposed reform of the married women's property laws was that marriage made man and wife 'one' and that the husband's 'superiority' meant he had a duty to support and protect his wife; however, the law not only accorded him control of the entire household's property and income, but also control of his wife. The scope for abuse was ever-present, as George Eliot was aware of in her representation of the sadistic Grandcourt in *Daniel Deronda*, who behaves towards his wife in an exemplary manner according to the law. Here, Eliot's ironic narrative voice slips into free indirect discourse:

Their marriage was a contract where all the ostensible advantages were on her [Gwendolen's] side, and it was only one of those advantages that her husband should use his power to hinder her from any injurious self-committal or unsuitable behaviour. He knew quite well that she had not married him [...] out of love for him personally; he had won her by the

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rank and luxuries he had to give her, and these she had got: he had fulfilled his side of the contract (573).

For Grandcourt, part of the ‘bargain’ is that his wife is ‘his to do as he liked with’ (572). Gwendolen does not even have the right to leave him, for although he delights in forcing her to submit to his will, he has actually broken no laws in his treatment of her. If she leaves, he has the ‘power to compel her to return’ (515).

For many Victorian wives trapped in unhappy marriages, destitution was a dreaded alternative and economic vulnerability was a major reason for the demands for reform of the marriage and property laws.¹² However, as Mary Lyndon Shanley states, opposition to changes in the married women’s property laws was based on fears that if a wife gained a legal identity she would metaphorically separate herself from her husband, and their interests may not then be identical.¹³ Set against this view was the feminist argument that marriage was a legalised form of prostitution, and that one of the ironies of the law’s protection of women from the world of finance was that under existing laws, financial gain, both for men and for women, often formed the basis of the ‘marriage market’. Another argument promoted by supporters of reform was that the MPs who opposed reform for the majority of women, ensured that their own daughters’ and sisters’ fortunes were protected by the ‘separate estates’ drawn up in marriage settlements under equity.¹⁴ In other words, the daughters of the wealthy did have the rights of property ownership. After two decades debating the issue, Parliament eventually passed the first Act in 1870, allowing all women limited rights to property ownership after marriage and enabling them to sign contracts and make wills. The second Act passed in 1882 was heralded by the *Women’s Suffrage Journal* as ‘the Magna Charta’ of women’s freedom.¹⁵ This Act finally conferred a legal identity on all married women.

George Eliot was a close friend to some of the activists for reform of the marriage laws and was aware of the momentous developments affecting women’s lives, although in one letter she admitted to feeling ‘too deeply the different complications’ of the Woman Question.¹⁶ For Eliot, marriage remained the principal concern of her heroines and indeed marriage is central to most of her plots. Yet she vacillates between condemning women’s social exclusion (particularly from education) and lack of property, where marriage becomes a ‘necessary economy’ to avoid poverty, and condemning women who are fond of property and power. Eliot’s

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life offers some indications of the complexity of her own position on the ‘Woman Question’. Before she began to live with George Henry Lewes in 1854, Eliot was the possessor of £2,000 which she inherited in 1849 from her father. This yielded an income of £90 a year.¹⁷ On entering her relationship with Lewes, Eliot chose to behave as though she were a married woman, voluntarily binding herself by the restrictions which affected the majority of wives, calling herself ‘Mrs Lewes’ and relinquishing her earnings to her lover. She arranged for cheques to be paid into Lewes’s account, and gave him control of her investments in canal, gas and railway companies. Her income from *Middlemarch*, for example, was invested by Lewes in American railway shares, and a proportion also went towards the support of Lewes’s wife and her four illegitimate children.¹⁸ Eliot’s generosity towards Lewes and his estranged wife (after all, she was legally a *feme sole* and had complete control over her property and earnings) indicates that the relinquishing of property was not just an ideal adopted by the saintly heroines in her fiction, but an ethical stance which she enacted in her own life. Yet her voluntary renunciation of her property did not mitigate the ostracism imposed on her by members of ‘polite’ society who considered her to be unrespectable. Eliot, then, occupied her own ‘equivocal’ position, ambiguously placed both as a traditional ‘wife’ holding conservative views and an educated professional writer who remained technically a ‘spinster’.

Ambiguity appears to have been a consistent feature of many Victorian women’s lives. Caught up in the absurdities of the legal system, women before 1870 found their relationship with the material world a highly confusing one; but it also had its consolations. Think, for example, of Serena Merle in Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) when, after likening herself to an ‘iron pot [...] shockingly chipped and cracked’ (214), she goes on to indicate the reciprocal relationship she has with her belongings:

What shall we call our ‘self’? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us – and then it flows back again. I know that a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I’ve a great respect for *things*! One’s self – for other people – is one’s expression of one’s self; one’s house, one’s furniture, one’s garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps – these things are all expressive (223).

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Merle, despite her disturbing tendency to see herself (and other people) as an object, shows an unusual level of awareness of what society expects of women, how the object world can aid the expression of a social identity, and what strategies and consolations women can take. Thus, Eliot's Lady Mallinger may see herself as 'a large living sign of her failure' (236), but the missal clasps worn as an ornament may help her in the difficult task of defining and 'expressing' her 'self' in a society that devalues her.

This process of reciprocity between humans and objects is open to numerous interpretations. As Bill Brown has recently warned, it is all too easy for us to read human-object relations as a story of 'the market-as-usual', presuming that all of the objects we encounter in nineteenth-century literature tell a story about commodity culture.¹⁹ Indeed, other stories about things and property ownership are also there to be read in most Victorian novels. As early property theorists have maintained, the basis of property ownership developed from humans' relationships with objects and these were often particularly intimate. For John Locke, appropriating a thing means it becomes part of oneself, while for Hugo Grotius people's personalities become part of the objects they own.²⁰ In *Daniel Deronda* both Gwendolen and Mirah use the resources of their jewellery boxes not only in attempts to invest in their own futures (11, 187, 200), but also as repositories of meaning intimately associated with their own lives and personalities. To presume that representations of such things are examples of 'the market-as-usual' is, as Brown suggests, to miss many significant meanings associated with inanimate objects. One of the reasons that critics so often assume that these representations offer evidence of a commodity culture is, of course, because this culture characterises the West in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As Brown has shown, we need to be aware of the multiplicity of possible meanings and interpretations surrounding the representations of things in nineteenth-century literature. Indeed, as Simon James has argued, realist fiction depends upon things as a way of signifying 'wealth's visible presence in the classic novel [which] tends to be [represented] as property, rather than currency, as the objects, clothing and environments which provide much of the fabric of realist narration. Externals exist both contingently and as indices of (economic) meaning'.²¹ The relative invisibility of money in the Victorian novel is not just because the representation of

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paper, cheques and coins is less interesting than representations of the products they can buy, but also because the Victorian novel frequently focuses on the female experience of domestic life, not usually depicted as cash-rich, and often signified by the foregrounding of domestic things.

Domestic objects, as I shall indicate below, were often much more than stores of monetary value. At a time when the burgeoning commodity culture of the period created increased access to objects (both visually and in terms of ownership), the novel represents such objects in terms of portable property where, to summarise Locke, ownership means that objects have the potential to become part of the self. As Susan M. Pearce has argued in her book, *On Collecting*, surrounding oneself with possessions can be seen as an attempt ‘to construct the relationship between “I” and “me” which creates individual identity, between the individual and others, and between the individual and the finite world of time and space’.²² One of the most well-known fictional advocates of the advantages of portable property is the office clerk Wemmick in *Great Expectations*, whose bizarre collection of curiosities is part of his strategy to gain an identity and social position in the modern metropolis; his ‘guiding-star always is, “Get hold of portable property” ’ (201). The lower middle-class Wemmick’s collection of things functions as a form of security, just as the missal-clasp bracelets, necklaces and earrings appear to do for the female characters in *Daniel Deronda*.

Eliot’s attitude towards the ambiguity of Victorian women’s lives was not a straightforward one. Her condemnation of property-seeking women is matched by a fascination with women’s fascination with the material world. Eliot indicates that for many women things were intimately bound up with notions of property ownership. Indeed, for many Victorians the notion of property was not necessarily limited to real estate (land and houses), but usually related to portable objects which, while theoretically capable of being exchanged for money, were frequently assessed in ways different from any simple market valuation. R. J. Morris in his book *Men, Women and Property in England, 1780-1870* offers an excellent introduction to the historical conditions of the object world of the Victorian period, showing that things were frequently viewed as property containing multiple meanings and associations. For many men and women of the early nineteenth century, real property, the family

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home or business, was often viewed as expendable, important mainly as a financial investment, 'a store of value which could be liquidated' into cash whenever necessary.²³ Things, on the other hand, were rather more meaningful, for they 'created the opportunities and stage sets upon which the values of politeness, domesticity and piety were acted out. They brought utility and status' (49). The emotional investments in things often led to a concern among owners with the afterlives of their portable property and bequeathing cherished objects was thus of particular significance. In his examination of hundreds of wills made by middle-class people in Leeds in the 1820s and 1830s, Morris found evidence that the family home was often viewed as of less importance than the transfer of objects between family and friends:

This lack of concern [for the family house] was another mark of the social boundary of the middle classes. There was none of the continuity of possession for house and estate characteristic of the aristocratic landed family. Nor was there any sense of attachment, moral, emotional and economic, between family and land evident in many studies of peasant inheritance. On death, the family house and the business became assets which were open to acquire new meanings or simply be turned into cash by way of the market (124).

Instead of prioritising real estate, many middle-class Victorians were what Morris terms 'things' people (128), those who had a high regard for their personal portable property and designed their wills in order to distribute such objects to those most likely to understand and appreciate the bequest. Morris's research reveals that most 'things' people were women (129). While men tended to make relatively straightforward wills involving greater levels of real estate in relation to portable property, and adhering to the custom of providing primarily for their widows and children, women were much more likely to write distinctive, complicated wills that 'mark[ed] out their social and emotional world. Compared to males their marked world was much broader. It contained a wider range of family, and more friends, including servants' (240). If women did own land and investments, husbands and fathers were likely in their wills to 'immobilise' it in a trust fund designed to minimise risk and consequently provide limited yet 'safe' returns. This meant that women were usually put in the position of 'passive' property owners as far as real estate and investments were concerned, dependent on the management of (the usually male) members of a trust fund (101-109). However, women could enjoy a

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much greater sense of autonomy in relation to their portable property. For example, the widow of a stonemason, Elizabeth Craven, who died in February 1830, was, according to Morris, a ‘things’ woman, and her will illustrates the sense of choice and control she enjoyed as the owner of portable property. Her (erratically punctuated) will opened with the following bequests:

Nephew, John Craven Ryley
 Mahogany desk, or bureau, feather bed, flock mattress, pier glass and small oak stand
 Nephew, Thomas Ryley
 Oak chest of drawers, eight days clock, two silver table spoons
 Nephew, William Ryley
 My silver pint, mahogany card table, oak dining table, round oak table, seven silver tea spoons, my silver sugar tongs
 Elizabeth Hutton, wife of John Hutton, Leeds.
 My mahogany elbow chair, my red and white china and the sum of £50 in money.
 John Mawson of Leeds, gentleman
 My silver gill and cream jug.

(reprinted in Morris, 248)

Here we can see that even small items of cutlery and furniture have been carefully passed to relatives and friends for their enjoyment and use and as memorials of the dead. Before 1870, only widows and spinsters could legally make a will and, as Morris makes clear, women who could do so made full use of their rights, formulating complex bequests in order to enhance emotional bonds, reward services and acts of kindness, and to try to control the afterlife of cherished objects (95-6). Eliot herself understood this relationship between women and portable property and her early fiction contains many comic references to characters such as Maggie Tulliver’s aunts, who fret about the preservation of their linen and china, and worry about how these can be safely bestowed after their deaths. The Dodson sisters also believe in the power of a will to send out specific messages to relatives and friends after death, as well as the necessity not to ‘alienate from them the smallest rightful share in the family shoe-buckles and other property’.²⁴

Eliot’s ridicule of ‘things’ women in her early fiction suggests a level of impatience towards the female property owner, and this is also evident in her approach to the Woman Question. While she supported her feminist friends Barbara Leigh Smith and Bessie Raynor Parkes in their demands for increased educational

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opportunities for women, Eliot was far more circumspect regarding their efforts to bring about reform of the married women's property laws. In a letter to Emily Davies she expressed her fears that increased legal powers and access to property rights for women would lead to their de-sexing, or what she termed the loss of 'that exquisite type of gentleness [and] ... tenderness suffusing a woman's being with affectionateness'.²⁵ Such fears emerged in her later fiction in her representations of power-seeking women, such as Mrs Transome in *Felix Holt*, Rosamond Vincy in *Middlemarch*, and the Princess Halm-Eberstein in *Daniel Deronda*. Yet Gwendolen Harleth, the most complex of these figures, is also presented as a victim of the institutional and cultural disabling of women, and for the first time in her fiction Eliot allows her heroine an escape route from her determined plot; as Gillian Beer states, 'we are left with the dangerous power of the uncharted future', signalling a shift from realism into modernist indeterminacy.²⁶

III

Eliot's representation of female ownership in her final novel offers one of the most perceptive accounts of human-object relations in the context of the property laws of the period.²⁷ Not only does she critique patriarchy in a way that puts her feminism beyond question, but the heroine's property quest also ends, interestingly, as a scene of existential freedom. This ending, however, is generally read by Victorian and recent critics alike as a scene of imprisonment and failure, and to ask why this negative reading has been so persistent demands that we consider how Eliot subverts the conventions of the property plots of the Victorian novel. It is also important to emphasise two key terms that Eliot repeatedly uses in relation to the novel's female characters: 'makeshift' and 'equivocal', both of which suggest the ambiguous social positions experienced by Victorian women, and the ambivalence and expediency characteristic of their lives. For example, socially and culturally disparate women could share similar characteristics: we have already seen how the legitimate wife, Lady Mallinger, is attracted to 'equivocal objects' and positioned as one herself; the narrator also emphasises Lydia Glasher's 'equivocal position' (288) as Grandcourt's mistress and the mother of his four children. Lady Mallinger's 'makeshift daughters'

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are echoed in the situation of Deronda's mother, the Princess Halm-Eberstein, who complains of her role as a 'makeshift link' in the transference of property between men (541). The heiress Catherine Arrowpoint resents the fact that her primary function is to 'carry the property gained in trade into the hands of a certain class' (211) through marriage, indicating that she too is intended to be a 'makeshift link' between male owners. Whether legitimate upper-class wives or common-law wives, heiresses or female artists, penniless outsiders or genteel ladies fallen on hard times, Eliot's female characters are shown coping with their 'equivocal positions' as 'makeshift' social beings in a system that privileges men.

Daniel Deronda, then, exposes society's view of women as 'makeshift links'. This is the term Deronda's mother, Leonora Charisi (later the Princess Halm-Eberstein), uses to describe her father's view of her as merely a conduit between men (541). Similarly, Sir Hugo Mallinger's daughters are termed 'make-shift feminine offspring' (611), useless in terms of their ability to retain their father's property and title, a uselessness which is felt by Lady Mallinger herself on her inability to provide Sir Hugo with the male heir he needs. Yet Eliot's critique of women's social exclusion from the patriarchal processes of primogeniture, signalled by her use of an ironic narrative voice, sits uneasily alongside her earlier representations of women and property, where she makes it clear that the only suitable action for a woman to take in relation to property is to reject it. Female characters as diverse as Esther Lyon, Eppie Marner, Dorothea Brooke, Mary Garth and Catherine Arrowpoint all breathe more freely when they have divested themselves of the property they own, or rejected any that is offered to them.²⁸ Women's ideal relationship to property and social achievement, Eliot suggests, should be like the prizes in the archery competition in *Daniel Deronda*, which 'were all of the nobler symbolic kind: not property to be carried off in a parcel, degrading honour into gain' (84).

In *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot produces a sophisticated analysis of the tensions engendered by patriarchy in the context of capitalism. Although Gwendolen's fantasies of power are exposed as morally deleterious, the dissolution of her 'self-possession' (373) once she has sold herself to Grandcourt is, I would argue, one of Eliot's most effective critiques of patriarchy. Gwendolen expects to 'manage'

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Grandcourt after she marries him (115), yet her joking comment to her mother, that she will only marry him if he first goes around ‘the world to bring me back the wedding-ring of a happy woman’ (79), indicates that she has few illusions about women’s usual lot within marriage. Yet despite this insight, gained by witnessing her mother’s own experience of a second marriage to the sinister Captain Davilow, the step-father who ‘had carried off his wife’s jewellery and disposed of it’ (233), Gwendolen naively expects her marriage to Grandcourt to confer upon her the power of ownership.²⁹ Indeed, when Eliot uses the word ‘own’ in relation to her heroines’ pretensions to citizenship and status, it is usually ironic. An example of this usage occurs in Chapter 31, when the newly-married Gwendolen arrives at Ryelands and receives the diamonds sent by Lydia Glasher. As she travels on the train to Ryelands, she looks forward to the ‘incredible fulfilment about to be given to her girlish dreams of being “somebody” – walking through her own furlong of corridors and under her own ceilings of an out-of-sight loftiness’ (301).

The link Gwendolen makes between being ‘somebody’ and property ownership is the link society emphasises as central to a valued social identity. Yet Gwendolen overlooks the fact that she will never actually ‘own’ the furlong of corridors or ceilings of Ryelands. Her husband owns all and, after his death, his son will assume ownership, whether a legitimate son borne by Gwendolen or the illegitimate son borne by Lydia (in the end Henleigh Glasher does inherit the estate). It is at this point, when she is most excited by the idea of ownership that Gwendolen is given the packet containing the box containing the jewel-case containing the diamonds and Lydia’s letter (302). The letter (which Sarah Gates describes as Lydia’s ‘last will and testament’)³⁰ is a perverse bequeathing: ‘These diamonds, which were once given with ardent love to Lydia Glasher, she passes on to you. You have broken your word to her, that you might possess what was hers’ (303). The use of the third person indicates not only the alienation of the diamonds but also the alienation of Lydia herself, who has lost her chance of gaining the settlement and social identity conferred by marriage. However, Lydia was already dangerously objectified by Grandcourt, who thinks: ‘Her person suited diamonds and made them look as if they were worth some of the money given for them’ (289), a sentence indicating that he considers her to be the object in relation to the diamonds as

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subject. A similar objectification occurs later in relation to Gwendolen when Grandcourt, forcing his wife to sail with him to Italy, looks at her ‘as if she were part of the complete yacht’ (575). Lydia insists on excluding Grandcourt from the transaction with ‘his mother’s diamonds’ (although one wonders how far *she* actually ‘owned’ them and whether she, too, was a ‘makeshift link’ in the transference of an heirloom between father and son), and like Gwendolen she exposes her illusions of ownership in her letter with terms such as ‘given’ and ‘possess’. Lydia fails to see that although Grandcourt describes the jewels as his ‘mother’s diamonds’ (289), he is the absolute owner and will remain so. As Trollope indicates in his novel *The Eustace Diamonds* (1871-3), women were never meant to ‘own’ heirlooms such as diamonds but to receive and wear them as symbols of their links to men, primarily using their bodies as display-cases for exhibiting the family property.

Lydia may not literally or legally bequeath the diamonds to Gwendolen, but she can bequeath her curse, and Eliot uses the language of melodrama to establish the relationship between the two women: ‘Truly here were poisoned gems, and the poison had entered into this poor young creature [...] In some form or other the Furies had crossed [Grandcourt’s] threshold’ (303). This situation is also figured in gothic terms with references to Grandcourt’s ‘withered heart’, ‘dead’ love, and the image Lydia uses of herself as ‘the grave in which your chance of happiness is buried’ (303). Eliot had foreshadowed this moment in the epigraph to Chapter 14 where Gwendolen receives the first of Lydia’s letters:

I will not clothe myself in wreck – wear gems
 Saved from cramped finger-bones of women drowned;
 Feel chilly vaporous hands of ireful ghosts
 Clutching my necklace; trick my maiden breast
 With orphans’ heritage. Let your dead love
 Marry its dead (122).

Again, the images of death and jewellery are used to indicate the rivalry between women for the property they can possess only tenuously. The notion of gems taken from the fingers of drowned women is echoed later when Gwendolen, most abject in her bondage as a prisoner on Grandcourt’s yacht, is described as having ‘heavily-jewelled hands’ (580). The ‘property’ she wears symbolises her manacled condition, although Grandcourt’s drowning (with all the ambiguity surrounding it) suggests a

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fortuitous escape from her bondage. Indeed before her widowhood, Gwendolen associates the word ‘property’ with Grandcourt’s power, having ‘certain associations [...] first with her mother, then with Mrs Glasher and her children’ (510). Gwendolen’s misery comes about when she realises that as a wife she is denied the power of the property owner, that her London home is a ‘painted gilded prison’ (504) rather than the source of the gratification of her desires she once believed it would be.

Of course, both Lydia and Gwendolen lack legitimacy as heroines (unlike Eliot’s exemplary heroines, Dorothea Brooke, Dinah Morris and Romola), and their attempts to gain personal satisfaction in life and an enviable social position are largely represented in negative terms. Yet both women, along with Leonora Charisi, are not straightforwardly condemned, for Eliot uses their stories to expose patriarchy in a way that deflects attention from their ‘misdemeanours’ (of bearing children out of wedlock, marrying to rescue the family fortune, or abandoning a child in order to pursue a career). When Gwendolen wears the diamonds in public, she also wears the same expression she wore ‘when she turned away a loser from the gaming-table’ (p.348). The diamonds act for her as a reminder that she is actually her husband’s possession. Eliot uses the terms ‘self-possession’ and ‘self-control’ ironically in relation to Gwendolen once she is married, as though she is emphasising the opposite: that legally a husband ‘owned’ his wife (304, 373, 475). As Eliot’s friend Barbara Bodichon stated in 1854, legally ‘a married woman’s body belongs to her husband; she is in his custody, and he can enforce his right by a writ of habeas corpus’.³¹ Eliot dramatises this legal bondage in Gwendolen’s loss of her self to Grandcourt in repeated ‘flashbacks’ to the image of her face as she lost at roulette, and her hopeless, but outwardly convincing, attempts to appear ‘self-possessed’.

The ‘poisoned gems’ are put to work repeatedly to illustrate the painful outcome of Gwendolen’s speculation on the marriage market, and Eliot again draws upon melodrama to emphasise this pain; for example, Gwendolen deliberately ‘hurt[s] herself with the jewels that glittered on her tightly-clasped finger pressed against her heart’ (521). This association between pain and jewellery is later repeated when Gwendolen considers murdering her husband with the jewelled pin in her cabinet: as she tells Deronda:

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There it was – something my fingers longed for among the beautiful toys in the cabinet in my boudoir – small and sharp, like a long willow leaf in a silver sheath. I locked it in the drawer of my dressing-case. I was continually haunted with it, and how I should use it. I fancied myself putting it under my pillow. But I never did (592-3).

Gwendolen's escape from her condition as a man's property is signalled by another jewellery image, for when Deronda sees her for the last time, we are informed that her hands are now 'unladen of all rings except her wedding-ring' (656), the latter no longer a symbol of her marriage but of her widowhood.³²

The Grandcourt diamonds act as a 'poison' on Gwendolen, yet the 'shabby' (377) turquoise necklace she pawns at Leubronn, which Deronda later redeems and returns to her, acts as an antidote. In a process of association, Gwendolen reads her own redemption in the redemption of the necklace by the priestly Deronda.³³ At the New Year's Eve ball 'she longed, in remembrance of Leubronn, to put on the old turquoise necklace for her sole ornament [...] Determined to wear the memorial necklace somehow, she wound it thrice round her wrist and made a bracelet of it' (377). We have here another example of female fetishism, and the complex history of this particular object offers some indication of how meanings can develop in relation to inanimate things. When she sells the necklace at Leubronn, the narrator explains that the stones 'had belonged to a chain once her father's', and that these 'three central turquoises' were of 'superior size and quality'. At this point, however, Gwendolen believes it to be 'the ornament she could most conveniently part with' (13), and clearly it does not function as a 'memorial' to the father who died when she was three years old. However, once it is returned to her (with the addition of a cambric handkerchief),³⁴ the necklace takes on new meanings, losing its utility as an ornament as it is converted into a makeshift bracelet ('in its triple winding [it] adapted itself clumsily to her wrist' [380]), eventually becoming a fetish of Deronda himself, a sign of his faith in Gwendolen's moral redemption. Although it appears as Gwendolen's most precious possession, for her husband it is a 'hideous thing' (380). So what started out as a man's chain, with the addition of some 'superior' stones, becomes Gwendolen's expendable necklace, a property she sells; it then becomes a source of irritation as a symbol of her losing gamble, and finally becomes a symbol of hope, associated with the man who redeemed it from the pawnbroker's and with her own redemption. As with Lady Mallinger's bracelet made from missal-clasps,

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Eliot shows that the world of objects can be a fluid one, where meanings and emotional attachments, as well as objects themselves, are subject to change. She indicates that women in particular, with their equivocal rights of ownership, often have a troubled relationship with the world of objects, and Gwendolen's relationship to the 'poisoned' diamonds and 'redeemed' turquoise necklace is clearly symptomatic of her equivocal social identity.

Deronda is in sympathy with women's attachment to particular objects. He not only redeems and returns Gwendolen's necklace, but is also sensitive to Lady Mallinger's taste in ornaments; similarly he carries his inherited diamond ring from England to his mother in Italy, and Jacob's mother and grandmother are delighted with the 'portable presents' (441) he gives to the children. Such sympathy originates in Deronda's own equivocal social position, and Eliot's emphasis on the dangers of the traditional patriarchal system of primogeniture appears to include her hero, who suffers some of the impediments usually experienced by women. Like women, he also feels that he has been excluded from a legitimate occupation: 'He found some of the fault in his birth and the way he had been brought up, which had laid no special demands on him' (308). However, the female complaint of 'nothing to do'³⁵ is more easily remedied for Deronda, able to travel and communicate freely and read what he likes. Deronda's unusual sympathy with women originates in his conviction that he is the illegitimate son of Sir Hugo Mallinger, and thus excluded from the property rights enjoyed by most men of his own class.

Yet Deronda is only shown to be a victim of British patriarchal systems of inheritance for part of the novel. When he discovers his origins as a Jew he takes a privileged place in an alternative, more ancient, patriarchal tradition. It is significant that Eliot uses portable property in the form of Deronda's 'memorable ring' (677) to illustrate his story. The diamond ring he pretends he needs to pawn at the Cohens' shop has a complex story, too. It was given to him by Sir Hugo (529), but actually belonged to his father, as the Princess Halm-Eberstein states when she first sees him (543). Later, Deronda sees it as a 'heavy ring' (676), a 'burthen' (677), as though he, like Gwendolen with her original view of her turquoise necklace, does not value an inheritance from an unknown father. His father, he discovers, was a man easily led by his wife, and the ring, associated with ornamentation and display, becomes a

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symbol of a femininity Deronda hopes to reject. The ring is eventually stolen by Mirah's father, as though it was meant to belong only to 'equivocal' men who lack an established place within the social order. The 'precious chest' (638), on the other hand, the property of his grandfather containing the 'preserved manuscripts, family records stretching far back' (640) becomes Deronda's most valued possession (618). The 'precious' contents contained within a highly decorative casing emphasise its antiquity: 'It was not very large, but was made heavy by ornamental bracers and handles of gilt iron. The wood was beautifully incised with Arabic lettering' (618). While the bond between Deronda and Mordecai is strengthened by the 'blent transmission' (643) of this patriarchal inheritance, Leonora Charisi sees it as a symbol of her oppression, and her contemplation of its destruction suggests her desire to disrupt the transmission of patriarchal culture from man to man. She tells her son:

Once, after my husband died, I was going to burn the chest. But it was difficult to burn; and burning a chest and papers looks like a shameful act. I have committed no shameful act – except what Jews would call shameful. I had kept the chest, and I gave it to Joseph Kalonymous. He went away mournful, and said, 'If you marry again, and if another grandson is born to him who is departed, I will deliver up the chest to him'. I bowed in silence. (546)

Again, she is unable to avoid her role as the 'makeshift link' between men, for it is clear that the chest could never be bequeathed to a granddaughter. Although Eliot represents the transmission of Jewish culture as a precious but non-material inheritance, she uses the language of material property and finance to describe it; Mordecai views the doing of good works as 'a property bearing interest' (491), while in relation to the Jewish spirit he states:

Let us make it a lasting habitation – lasting because movable – so that it may be carried from generation to generation, and our sons unborn may be rich in the things that have been, and possess a hope built on an unchangeable foundation (453).

Female exclusion from the transmission of culture and property is symptomatic of the fact that 'girls' doings are always priced low' (418), as Kate Meyrick states. The Meyrick household, dominated by women, suggests a miniature (in all senses of the word) alternative to patriarchy, although the only male of the household, Hans, does hold a somewhat privileged position. Yet for Eliot, the

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Meyrick women (and Mirah, who joins their household) have an ideal relationship with the object world. Mrs Meyrick's house is one of 'the homes of a culture the more spotlessly free from vulgarity, because poverty has rendered everything like display an impersonal question, and all the grand shows of the world simply a spectacle which arouses no petty rivalry or vain effort after possession' (166), and Eliot makes it clear that personal property should reflect a 'nicely-select life, open to the highest things in music, painting, and poetry' (167), rather than display the owner's status and wealth.

Although most critics have read Gwendolen's suffering as a rite-of-passage towards the hallowed ranks of property-rejecting female characters such as Mirah and the Meyrick women, the ending of *Daniel Deronda* is highly ambivalent, where the moral and economic plots become blurred as far as Gwendolen is concerned, attention being deflected to the story of Deronda's mission to the East. Many critics read the resolution of Gwendolen's story in terms of her failure. Pauline Nestor sees her as a 'sad and diminished figure',³⁶ while Sarah Gates considers her as having 'no script but that of the tragic scapegoat, since the domestic closure of wifehood given in the other Eliot novels to the romance heroines, has here been figuratively handed to the hero' (720). She adds that Gwendolen, 'Not married, not dead, not exiled, and quite sane, [...] will live out a plausible tragedy, figured as a role-less and repetitious living and an end-less bettering' (721). Sarah A. Willburn argues a similar point, noting that 'Grandcourt's possessions do not pass to Gwendolen through their marriage. Because Gwendolen is not allowed to be an independent proprietor, she is not allowed property, empire, or influence. Her father's company and Grandcourt have both failed her'.³⁷ Patricia Menon sees Gwendolen destroyed by the 'sadistic abandonment' of both Eliot and Deronda.³⁸ Although Alexander Welsh sees Gwendolen's future as 'unclear' he reads her statement, 'I mean to live' as 'Hysterical words [...], promises not to kill herself', and he adds that she 'will not be much rewarded or consoled in the end'.³⁹ What is extraordinary about these interpretations of the close of Gwendolen's plot is that critics presume that Gwendolen is 'not allowed property' and seem to concur with Hans Meyrick, who thinks the only fitting outcome for Gwendolen's story should be her remarrying. Deronda, however, asks, 'Is it absolutely necessary that Mrs Grandcourt should

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marry again?’ (685), and Eliot, in a rare move, leaves her young heroine single and in possession of a comfortable inheritance of £2,000 a year for life, a substantial sum for a ‘penniless’ woman, despite Sir Hugo’s exaggerated statement that she is ‘no better off than a doctor’s wife’ (648). To put her income into context, we are informed that Deronda receives an income of £700 a year, Mrs Davilow is given a ‘generous’ allowance of £800 a year by Grandcourt, while Eliot, as I mentioned earlier, received only £90 per year when she first met Lewes in 1854. Clearly, Gwendolen’s £2,000 a year is a substantial sum and a great deal more than she had ever received before her marriage; it is certainly not the poverty to which critics refer. Added to this money is her ownership of Gadsmere, not her chosen home, but we are informed it could be leased ‘on capital terms’ (651). Deronda’s comment that Gwendolen need not marry again, and that her inheritance is one she ‘will be quite contented with’ (613), turns us away from the traditional marriage plot of the Victorian novel to face a lack of closure quite untypical of Eliot’s work, or for that matter, of the Victorian classic realist text. Gwendolen’s repeated assertion that she ‘shall live’ (691-2) is part of the irresolution of the novel. In one of the few positive readings of Gwendolen’s fate at the novel’s close, Gillian Beer notes her ‘fierce will to survive’ and that she ‘escapes the marriage market’.⁴⁰ That so many modern readers see marriage as the only ‘happy’ ending for Gwendolen, whose sexless regard for the ‘feminine’ Deronda as a mentor-figure is the only positive relationship she has with a man, indicates that Eliot’s reinstatement of her as a *feme sole*, this time with property to control and enjoy, has not been sufficiently registered and appreciated.

Endnotes

I am grateful to Melissa Fegan, Anthea Trodd, Alan Wall, Chris Walsh and the anonymous reader at *nineteen* for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

1. George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. by Graham Handley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 323. All further references will be given in the body of the text.
2. Emily Apter, *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1991) p. x. All further references will be given in the body of the text.

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3. For useful discussions of material culture in relation to nineteenth-century novels see Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), and Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
4. Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by R. Howard (Blackwell: Oxford, 1986) pp. 141-48.
5. See Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. by David Trotter and Charlotte Mitchell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996). All further references will be given in the body of the text. M. E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, ed. by David Skilton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); and Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. by Nicola Bradbury (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). All further references will be given in the body of the text.
6. Reprinted in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight, (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), V, pp. 312 & 314.
7. See Lee Holcombe, *Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England* (Toronto & Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1983), p. 29.
8. Holcombe, *Wives and Property*, p. 25.
9. See E. K. Helsinger, R. L. Sheets and W. Veeder, *The Woman Question and Literature in Britain and America, 1837-1883*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989), I, p. 5, and Holcombe, *Wives and Property*, p. 30.
10. George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. by David Carroll, Introduction by Felicia Bonaparte (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 593.
11. However, defining paraphernalia was difficult, as Trollope indicates in *The Eustace Diamonds*, ed. by W. J. McCormack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 226-31.
12. Holcombe, *Wives and Property*, p. 49.
13. Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage and the Law in Victorian England, 1850-1895* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1989), p. 46.
14. Holcombe, *Wives and Property*, p. 38
15. Quoted in Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage and the Law*, p. 124.
16. Reprinted in *Letters*, V, p. 58.
17. See Rosemary Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), p. 68.
18. Ashton, *George Eliot*, pp. 332-33.
19. Brown, *A Sense of Things*, p. 13.
20. The theories of John Locke and Hugo Grotius are here summarised by Karl Olivecrona in 'Locke's Theory of Appropriation', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 24:96 (1974), 220-34 (pp. 223 & 225). See also John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. by Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), p. 185.
21. Simon James, *Unsettled Accounts: Money and Narrative in the Novels of George Gissing* (London: Anthem Press, 2003), p. 28.

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22. Susan Pearce, *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 177.
23. R. J. Morris, *Men, Women and Property in England, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 15. All further references will be given in the body of the text.
24. George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. by A. S. Byatt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 365.
25. Reprinted in *Letters*, IV, p. 468.
26. Gillian Beer, *George Eliot* (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1986), p. 223.
27. See Jeff Nunokawa's chapter on *Daniel Deronda* in *The Afterlife of Property: Domestic Security and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994) for a rather different reading of property relations in the novel.
28. See Nunokawa, *The Afterlife of Property*, p. 80.
29. For an interesting discussion of the fathers in *Daniel Deronda* see Judith Wilt, ' "He Would Come Back": The Fathers of Daughters in *Daniel Deronda*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 42:3 (1987), 313-38.
30. Sarah Gates, ' "A Difference of Native Language": Gender, Genre and Realism in *Daniel Deronda*', *ELH*, 68 (2001), 699-724, (p. 721). All further references will be given in the body of the text.
31. Quoted in Nunokawa, *The Afterlife of Property*, p. 83.
32. For perceptive discussions of Eliot's representations of jewellery see Jean Arnold, 'Cameo Appearances: The Discourse of Jewelry in *Middlemarch*', *Victorian Literature and Culture* (2002), 265-88; and Bonnie S. Zimmerman, ' "Radiant as a Diamond": George Eliot, Jewelry and the Female Role', *Criticism*, 19:3 (Summer, 1977), 212-22.
33. Susan Ostrov Weisser sees Deronda not so much as a priest but 'like some irritating modern psychoanalyst' in 'Gwendolen's Hidden Wound: Sexual Possibilities and Impossibilities in *Daniel Deronda*', *Modern Language Studies*, 20:3 (Summer 1990), 3-13, (p. 7).
34. It is interesting to note that Grandcourt himself is described by Mr Vandernoodt as 'a washed-out piece of cambric' (p. 370).
35. For a discussion of the Victorian woman's plight of 'nothing to do' see Florence Nightingale, *Cassandra*, reprinted in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. by M. H. Abrams, (New York and London: Norton, 2006), II, p. 1600.
36. Pauline Nestor, *George Eliot* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 154.
37. Sarah A. Willburn, *Possessed Victorians: Extra Spheres in Nineteenth-Century Mystical Writings* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 17.
38. Patricia Menon, *Austen, Eliot, Charlotte Brontë and the Mentor-Lover* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), p. 178.
39. Alexander Welsh, 'The Later Novels' in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. by George Levine, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 70.
40. Beer, *George Eliot*, pp. 226 & 227.

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