


1993

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Miller, Derek, "A Note on Hermione in Daniel Deronda" (1993). *The George Eliot Review*. 198.  
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## Derek Miller

### A NOTE ON HERMIONE IN *DANIEL DERONDA*

After a paragraph in which the narrator sympathetically examines Rex's love for his cousin Gwendolen, the young people plan a *tableau vivant* at Offendene. Gwendolen rejects Rex's suggestion of himself as Achilles, with Gwendolen as Briseis, then agrees with his next idea that she should be Hermione as the statue, and he Leontes, from *The Winter's Tale*. During the playing of this scene, and provoked, perhaps, by the 'thunderous chord' (91)<sup>1</sup> struck by Herr Klesmer on the piano, the panel on the wall opens to disclose what the family saw on the day of their moving in, 'the picture of an upturned dead face, from which an obscure figure seemed to be fleeing with outstretched arms' (56). In this episode, the reader is invited to look at and then beyond the moment near the end of the play as a comment on matters early in the novel.

Just before the passage about Rex's love, the narrator offers to the reader the most famous of several warnings about the way the novel is to be read, 'for all meanings, we know, depend on the key of interpretation' (88). The tableau itself is 'likely to be successful, since we know from ancient fable that an imitation may have more chance of success than the original' (90). This touches, of course, the questions of mimesis discussed by Aristotle, but also takes the reader back a few lines to ancient fables arising from the mention of Achilles.

Hermione, a daughter of Helen and Menelaus, wished to marry her cousin Orestes. Menelaus, however, gave her in marriage to Pyrrhus in return for favours received from his father Achilles at the siege of Troy. Pyrrhus, according to Lemprière, was named for the yellowness of his hair — Grandcourt, it will be remembered, 'showed an extensive baldness surrounded with a mere fringe of reddish-blond hair' (145), similar to a monk's tonsure. Some sources report Hermione's jealousy of Pyrrhus's concubine Andromache — like Mrs. Glasher, a soldier's widow. Others record the murder of Pyrrhus by Hermione and Orestes, the king of Argos, whom she then married.

Mr. Gascoigne, who sees himself as paternally responsible for Gwendolen, urges her, in his snobbish indebtedness to the aristocracy, to make a match with Grandcourt, much as Menelaus is paying the political debts he accumulated at Troy. In this reading of the Hermione incident, the commodification of Gwendolen deepens; her terror of the 'upturned dead face' includes herself as an aghast and fleeing murderess; and both Shakespeare and ancient fable encourage those who would like to think of Gwendolen finding her best self in marriage to her cousin Rex.

#### Note

- 1 All page numbers refer to *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Barbara Hardy (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1986)