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A NOTE OF DANIEL DERONDA'S CIRCUMCISION

by Derek Miller

For the last twenty years or so critics have wondered if Daniel Deronda, the eponymous hero of George Eliot's last novel, was circumcised or not. If he was, he would scarcely have to wait for his mother's revelations to know he was a Jew. Some commentators, however, say that, for medical reasons, circumcision was not uncommon among middle class people at the time of Deronda's infancy, and he might therefore not have given much attention to the matter.

Professor John Sutherland, recently entering this lively discussion,¹ points to the rebellion by Deronda's mother against her father's Judaism as a prime factor in his persuasive argument against the circumcision. Sutherland omits to note that later on, uncircumcised, Deronda might have to deal with his incompleteness as a Jew in a life devoted to redemptive activities among his people.

Victorian propriety and Eliot's own reticence – did Dorothea and Casaubon consummate the marriage? – keep such questions off the page. But there is no evasion, for the symbolic references and narrator's language in each of these answer the question as asked, while they also stir larger reverberations that transcend the literal level and become part of the thematic material of the novel.

Deronda, an apparent ward of Sir Hugo, muses about the likelihood of his illegitimacy when, at thirteen – his barmitzvah year – he tries to understand his birth and ancestry. Although his nature refuses a self-centredness that would allow the stigma of his birth to turn him into an outcast, 'an Ishmaelite',² he 'naturally had some resentment on behalf of the Hagars and Ishmaels'.³ Since Ishmael was circumcised at thirteen,⁴ Deronda can also be seen as entering at that age into God's covenant with Israel.

In this reading it hardly matters if the mundane ritual has been done, compared with the importance of the allegorical message. Deronda skips a generation to return to the identity, though not the observances, of his grandfather, and is linked to another people through a different paternity. His connection as an Ishmael figure to the legendary father of the Arabs calls on the 'many-sided sympathy'⁵ he will need in his mission to further Jewish national desires in the Near East.

Notes

1. John Sutherland, 'Is Daniel Deronda circumcised?' in *Can Jane Eyre be Happy?* (Oxford, 1997), 169-176.
2. George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Barbara Hardy (Harmondsworth, 1986), 215.
3. *Ibid*, 489.
4. Genesis 17:25.
5. *Daniel Deronda*, 412.