

**Lauren Cameron. "Spencerian Evolutionary Psychology in *Daniel Deronda*." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 43, 2015, pp. 63-81.**

The works of Herbert Spencer have been rather neglected by literature and science studies, and Lauren Cameron seeks to redress this balance by reading George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876) in dialogue with Spencer's *Principles of Psychology* (1855; 1870). Cameron provocatively asserts that "neither project could have succeeded without the other," since Eliot's work "modifies and limits [Spencer's] by grounding his grand generalizations in particularities that are relatable to daily life" (77). It is a bold claim, but this article nevertheless persuades the reader that there is good reason to position these two distinct corpuses as interdependent.

Cameron begins with an accessible overview of Spencer's philosophy, and his theory of psychology specifically, within its nineteenth-century context. She also summarizes the extent of recent research on Spencer, which has tended to be by historians of science rather than literature and science scholars. The article then sketches the contours of the intellectual and personal facets of Spencer and Eliot's relationship. Notably, Cameron demonstrates that they each held the other's works in high regard, pushing against the more antagonistic relationship that some biographers describe.

To understand a "character's motivations and relationships in *Daniel Deronda*," Cameron argues, we must recognize "their basis in Spencerian psychology ... which proposed a neurally based associationist psychological system that relied on Lamarckian inheritance of acquired [mental] characteristics" (68). The article then focuses upon "Two of the most in-depth case studies of associationist psychology and heritable mental characteristics in a Spencerian evolutionary vein" which Cameron identifies as Eliot's characterizations of "Gwendolen Harleth – whose mental associations and inheritances are ultimately destructive and lead to an evolutionary end-stop – and Daniel Deronda – whose traits are redemptive and promise progress for the future of his family and nation" (70).

Spencer's approach to evolutionary psychology relies upon both inheritance and experience, and Cameron demonstrates how these strands underpin Gwendolen's actions in the novel. Eliot is shown to have developed the character in a way that owes much to Spencer's position on the "'hereditary transmission' of 'psychical peculiarities'" (70-71). Perhaps more significantly, however, it is argued that the traumas suffered by Gwendolen, particularly regarding her relationship with Grandcourt, can be explained by Spencer's theory that "the strength of the tendency which each state of consciousness has to follow any other, depends on the frequency with which the two have been connected in experience" (71, 72). It thus becomes inevitable, Cameron claims, that Gwendolen does not develop a more "integrated sense of self" or reassert her position as a reproductive agent in society, having become "a Spencerian psychological Tragedy" (73).

In contrast, Cameron finds that Eliot develops Daniel into a "significantly more psychologically integrated" character, showing how "he is able to achieve a harmonious sense of self" by following a positive path that owes much to Spencer's evolutionary psychology (73). Daniel's narrative thread in the novel is, of course, closely bound up with questions of inheritance, and Cameron identifies how Daniel's experience of

perceiving inherited mental characteristics is described in overtly Spencerian terms. I would contend, however, that this is slightly less convincing than her reading of Gwendolen's characterization.

Cameron briefly suggests how Spencer's evolutionary psychology acts as a "lay theory" that underpins the novel, with other characters, such as the Meyricks, clearly invoking its principles. She then strikingly concludes with the suggestion that "Eliot was practicing Spencerian evolution," demonstrating through her novels "intellectual rather than biological reproduction" (78).

Overall this is a tightly-argued article. Well-chosen quotations from Spencer and Eliot illuminate the connections that Cameron draws out, although a larger and more wide-ranging piece of scholarship would be required to fully develop her overarching thesis. As Cameron acknowledges, the limitations of space mean that she is only able "to focus on the basics of Spencerian evolutionary psychology" (77); she also suggests that such an analysis could be carried out with any of Eliot novels. It would be churlish, therefore, to be critical about the threads that are left unfollowed. This article opens up a series of new critical readings of Eliot's last novel, inevitably leaving much unsaid regarding how Spencer's desire to unify scientific disciplines speaks to broader interdisciplinary ideas at play within Eliot's works.

Cameron takes Spencer's ideas seriously, as Eliot did, rather than dismissing them, as many recent critics have tended to do. It should be acknowledged, however, that while Eliot's relationship with Spencer is particularly remarkable, she was not the only Victorian writer to have been influenced in important ways by his widely-read synthetic philosophy. While Spencer's expansive corpus may not resonate with us in the manner that Darwin's does today, it is short-sighted to consign Spencer to a footnote, as he so often is. This exemplary article therefore paves the way for future work that places Spencer in a more significant position within the field of literature and science.

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