Newton, K.M. "Circumcision, Realism and Irony in *Daniel Deronda*." *Modernizing George Eliot: The Writer as Artist, Intellectual, Proto-Modernist, Cultural Critic*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010. 114–124. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849665155.ch-008>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 10:13 UTC.

Copyright © K.M. Newton 2011. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Circumcision, Realism and Irony in *Daniel Deronda*

I

Daniel Deronda has been attacked by critics who take the view that Eliot in her final novel compromised the realism with which she was generally associated by allowing symbolism, idealism and flirtations with the romance mode to dominate in the Jewish part of the novel. This led to the claim that it was structurally incoherent, a claim I have questioned in Chapters 6 and 7. A different critique of the novel's coherence emerged from contemporary critical theory. In an innovative and challenging deconstructive reading of the novel, it was claimed that Eliot's realism was founded on an irresolvable contradiction, and it was implied that this was symptomatic of virtually all forms of literary realism. The ultimate source of this deconstructive critique was a footnote to an essay first published in 1975 in which Steven Marcus remarked that a graduate student of his, Lennard Davis, had noticed something interesting about *Daniel Deronda*:

Mr Davis has discovered a detail – or a missing detail – in *Daniel Deronda* that throws the whole central plot of the novel out of kilter. Deronda's identity is a mystery to himself and has always been. It is only when he is a grown man, having been to Eton and Cambridge, that he discovers that he is a Jew. What this has to mean – given the conventions of medical practice at the time – is that he never looked down. In order for the plot of *Daniel Deronda* to work, Deronda's circumcised penis must be invisible, or non-existent – which is one more demonstration in detail of why the plot does not in fact work.¹

This 'detail' became the central element in a deconstructive reading of the novel by Cynthia Chase.

Chase argues that the novel demands not only a spiritual conversion on the part of Deronda but also a physical transformation of the type found in fairy tales. It is not enough for Deronda to 'take up the spiritual and cultural tradition of Judaism', since the narrator, she claims, makes it clear that to be a Jew is to be born a Jew. But *Daniel Deronda* employs a discourse that cannot accommodate such a transformation. Chase writes,

Insistence on the hero's specifically Jewish identity not only puts in question the authority of the discourse but effectively disrupts its coherence. The text's insistent reference leads relentlessly to the referent – to *la chose*, in fact: the

hero's phallus, which must have been circumcized, given what we are told of his history. In the period in which *Deronda*'s story takes place, male babies were not routinely circumcized. Circumcision was a ritual procedure practiced by Jews, so that evidence of circumcision amounted to evidence of Jewish origin. For *Deronda* not to have known he was Jewish until his mother told him means, in these terms, 'that he never looked down', an idea that exceeds, as much as does magical metamorphosis, the generous limits of realism. *Deronda* must have known, but he did not: otherwise, of course, there could be no story. The plot can function only if *la chose*, *Deronda*'s circumcized penis, is disregarded; yet the novel's realism and referentiality function precisely to draw attention to it.²

Chase goes on to use this 'detail' and her interpretation of it to make a number of deconstructionist points concerning rhetoric and signification in the novel. The implicit claim that Eliot either did not realize that circumcision was problematic for its realist plot or that she merely disregarded it points to an assumption that Eliot's approach to the novel lacks the literary self-consciousness that is characteristic of modernist and postmodernist fiction and consigns it squarely within conventional Victorian realism.

In the passage I have quoted from Chase she uses conventional historical discourse: 'In the period in which *Deronda*'s story takes place, male babies were not routinely circumcized.' She is seeking to validate her interpretation by reference to history, and in doing so she introduces into her interpretation empirical considerations, which require to be supported by evidence. Since 'Deronda's circumcized penis', Chase claims, 'is disregarded', then the question of the author's intentionality is also introduced as who else could be doing this disregarding but the author, even though elsewhere Chase denies that intention is important for her interpretation: her reading is not 'concerned merely with meanings that could plausibly be ascribed to the intentions of the narrator'.³ (Chase here appears to be identifying the narrator with the author.) However, for circumcision to be 'disregarded' the author must have known about circumcision as a Jewish practice and chosen (or chosen for her narrator) consciously or unconsciously to ignore it.

Chase's use of historical discourse and her implicit assumption about the author's intention mean that it is legitimate to bring the historical and the intentional into play in considering her reading, either to support it or to call it into question. Is she right to assume that only Jews would have been circumcised in nineteenth-century England or that Eliot knew this but was compelled to disregard this knowledge for the purpose of making her plot work? There are, however, several other points connected with the question of intention that need to be considered before further discussion of the historical aspect of this question.

It could be argued that the fact that the matter of circumcision has been noticed only fairly recently and apparently did not trouble readers for nearly a century⁴ indicates that this is no more an internal contradiction in the novel than the inconsistent time schemes are an internal contradiction in

Othello. Yet Eliot's commitment to realism and the great pains she took in her work to create an authentic and accurate representation of the world, to the smallest 'detail', one feels tempted to say, suggest that it would have been unlikely that she would have thought nothing of infringing realism by disregarding a documentary fact about Jews to serve her literary purposes. Chase is right to claim that, if Eliot departed from realism in this instance, this is a clear disruption of the coherence of the novel's realist discourse. A simplistic defence of Eliot might be that she could have merely forgotten that Jews were circumcised. Given her deep interest in and knowledge of Judaism and Jewish culture, this seems extremely improbable. It might also be claimed that, bearing in mind Victorian sensitivity regarding open discussion of such matters, Deronda need not know that he is circumcised, but this can hardly be reconciled with the interest he develops in and the study he makes of Judaism. A final possibility that needs to be considered is that we cannot know for certain that he was circumcised, but this would seem to be contradicted by the fact that he was 'more than two years old' (*DD*, 544) when his mother chose to separate him from Jewish life and gave him to Sir Hugo, and circumcision as a Jewish rite takes place eight days after birth. Chase's position can only be seriously challenged, I believe, by the view that Eliot intended circumcision to be realistically present in the novel even though it is not mentioned and indeed cannot be mentioned in so many words. I shall argue that it is possible not only to accommodate Deronda's circumcision in an interpretation of the novel that does not see realism as being compromised but also to use this 'detail' to overcome some of the traditional objections that have been made in regard to the 'Deronda plot'.

Before supporting this position, one should, however, consider an alternative both to my view and to that of Chase. In an essay entitled 'Is Daniel Deronda Circumcised?',⁵ John Sutherland takes a radically mimetic and anti-formalist view of the issue. He defines his area of interest as 'that forbidden territory, the *hors texte* – or, more precisely, that implied and ambiguous world which lies on the other side of the words on the page'. In his discussion of novels he in effect abolishes any distinction between the world of the novel and the real world. He argues that one can legitimately infer that Deronda's mother took a decision not to have her son circumcised from the remark she makes to him when recounting her reasons for having him adopted by Sir Hugo: 'I saved you from it' (*DD*, 540). On the surface this means she saved him from being brought up in the Jewish faith, but Sutherland extends the meaning to include circumcision. In normal practice it is the Jewish father who arranges circumcision eight days after the birth, but Sutherland overcomes this problem by asserting that her husband 'Ephraim is a poor creature, and wholly subject to his wife' and would therefore 'not stand in her way'.

But if one looks closely at Deronda's mother's account of her decision to have her son brought up as a non-Jew in Chapter 51, Sutherland's argument

is surely lacking in credibility. The key passage is the following in which she states to Deronda,

We must part again soon, and you owe me no duties. I did not wish you to be born. I parted with you willingly. When your father died, I resolved that I would have no more ties, but such as I could free myself from. I was the Alcharisi you have heard of: the name had magic wherever it was carried. Men courted me. Sir Hugo Mallinger was one who wished to marry me. He was madly in love with me. One day I asked him, 'Is there a man capable of doing something for love of me, and expecting nothing in return?' He said, 'What is it you want done?' I said, 'Take my boy and bring him up as an Englishman, and let him never know anything about his parents'. (DD, 543)

It is clear from this passage that it is only after her husband dies that it occurs to her to give Deronda away and have him brought up as a non-Jew. All that she says about her son before that point is that she did not wish him born. There is no indication that she had any thought of giving her son away until her husband died, by which time Deronda is two years old. If she had no plan initially to separate Deronda from Jewishness and Judaism and only decided to do so when the death of her husband gave her that opportunity, what would have been the point of forcing her husband not to have him circumcised when he was going eventually to know that he was the son of a Jewish mother and father?

Clearly the key event in Deronda being given to Sir Hugo was the death of Deronda's father. It was this that precipitated the plan to have Deronda brought up as a non-Jew in ignorance of his origins. But if Deronda's father had lived Deronda would surely have stayed with his parents or at least with his father and his Jewishness would have been apparent whether circumcised or not. Sutherland makes much of the point that Deronda's father 'is a poor creature, and wholly subject to his wife' and thus would not have resisted the non-circumcision of his son. But Deronda's non-circumcision would make sense only in the context of a plan to separate Deronda from Jewishness right from the start as part of her rebellion against her heritage. But she had no such plan when Deronda was born. Though her husband may have been compliant there is no suggestion in the text that he would have been compliant to the extent of agreeing to give the two-year-old Deronda away to Sir Hugo and having him brought up in ignorance of his parentage.

But perhaps the major weakness of Sutherland's argument is a more formal one: is it legitimate to treat the novel, even the 'realist novel', as if it were real life so that events beyond those actually recounted are available for the reader to speculate about? It seems to me to be highly unlikely that Eliot was the kind of writer who would have thought of the novel as working in such terms. Though her fiction is rightly thought of as realist in conception, her work, especially from *Silas Marner* on, is highly formal in its nature. Devices such as parallelism, analogy, symbolism, patterns of imagery, keywords all emphasize

the fact that her novels are literary structures and powerfully suggest that she would not have wanted her readers to go far beyond so carefully designed a text in the way that Sutherland does.

II

To return to my claim that circumcision is a presence in the text and that Eliot intended it to be, the first point to make in supporting this position is that direct reference is not necessary for some element to be seen as present in a literary text. But the claim that circumcision is included in the realism of *Daniel Deronda* is based on literary logic and not interpretive speculation. In terms of realism circumcision is logically entailed by the fact that Deronda is born into a Jewish family and is not handed over to Sir Hugo until he is two years old. There is no need for it to be mentioned directly, since it is indirectly signified by Deronda's Jewish origins. A weakness of Chase's argument that circumcision is disregarded and deconstructs the novel's claim to realism is that her interpretation itself disregards the impossibility of circumcision being referred to openly in a Victorian novel. Readers of novels are well aware that they, as theorist of narrative Seymour Chatman puts it, 'must fill in gaps with essential or likely events, traits and objects which for various reasons have gone unmentioned'.⁶ If a male character has been born into a Jewish family, therefore, the assumption will be that he has been circumcised, unless it is made clear that he is not. Although Jewish infants with a family history of bleeding can apparently be exempted, such a consideration would need to be directly mentioned before it could play a signifying role in the text. One must therefore assume the norm unless the text provides an indication to the contrary.

Circumcision can be seen as having the same status in this context as sexual organs, and of course circumcision must allude to these. As Chase herself remarks, both sexual organs and circumcision would be likely to create embarrassment among Victorian readers. But, though no embarrassing reference may be made to sexual organs in Victorian novels, even a Victorian reader would assume that characters, being human, possessed them and would know, without having to be told by the author, that these unmentionables performed a signifying function – in defining the characters' sexual identity, in determining the nature of relationships between them, in accounting for any children they might have. I would suggest that circumcision signifies in a similar way in *Daniel Deronda*.

It might be objected by those who see Eliot as a typical narrow-minded Victorian that she would never have contemplated even an indirect allusion to circumcision, a view of Eliot that Cross's biography promoted and one that is surely outmoded. Chase's interest, however, is in the novel's literary

discourse: if Deronda is of Jewish origin and was given to Sir Hugo when he was two years old then his ignorance of his Jewish birth, attested by his circumcision, is irreconcilable with the novel's plot, and this contradiction is symptomatic of a fundamental problem with the nineteenth-century novel's realist aesthetic. But she ignores the obvious point that it is Eliot as author who chooses to have Deronda handed over at the age of two. If circumcision is irreconcilable with the realism of the plot, as both Marcus and Chase claim, then Eliot could easily have arranged matters so that Deronda was handed over to Sir Hugo almost immediately after birth or at the very least have been vague as to when he was handed over. The fact that she provides information which makes the reader – that is, any reader who thinks of the matter – assume, in accordance with the norms of signification, that Deronda would have been circumcised does not suggest that circumcision is disregarded; on the contrary, it suggests that she intends it to be present in the novel as a signifier though she cannot mention it explicitly.

But the most serious objection to my position is the claim by Chase that in the period in which the novel is set circumcision is an unmistakable sign of Jewishness and that Deronda must know he is a Jew even though the plot is based on his lacking such knowledge. To return therefore to the historical question, Chase's assumption that circumcision was not 'routinely' practised in Victorian England. But, though it may not have been 'routine', is there evidence to suggest that it was fairly common for non-Jews to be circumcised? If there is, Chase's interpretation of the novel is clearly vulnerable and my argument is strengthened, since circumcision need not be an unambiguous sign of Jewishness.

It is clear from nineteenth-century medical books that circumcision was a standard treatment for the common condition in infants of congenital phimosis, the contraction of the preputial orifice. I shall quote some representative comments:

In all common cases of natural phimosis, the best modern operators in this metropolis, and many excellent surgeons abroad, prefer circumcision.⁷

In all cases [of phimosis] I prefer circumcision as the simplest and speediest operation, and as leaving the most satisfactory result.⁸

Another common condition is a prepuce much too long ... Such prepuces always call for circumcision.⁹

Eliot's own physician, Sir James Paget, something of an authority on this area of medicine, also believed that phimosis 'frequently requires operation in children, especially if the orifice of the prepuce be very narrow',¹⁰ though Paget believed that surgery was too often resorted to in such cases. Paget was also a friend of Eliot and G. H. Lewes and a copy of the first edition of the book I have quoted from, published in 1875, with a dedication to Lewes, is to be found among their books in Dr Williams's Library.¹¹

There is also some evidence that even in the nineteenth century circumcision was performed for hygienic or health reasons. P. C. Remondino in his admittedly bizarre *History of Circumcision* maintains that 'the physician class' in the United States, France and England choose circumcision as a hygienic precaution with every male child in their own families, and he goes on to say more generally, 'The practice is now much more prevalent than is supposed, as there are many Christian families where males are regularly circumcised soon after birth, who simply do so as a hygienic measure.'¹²

Several of the writers whom I have quoted mention that phimosis could encourage masturbation, which was almost universally condemned during this period, and clearly this would be an additional reason for circumcising infants. Paget did not claim it was injurious to health, though this was not the general view, but still condemned it: 'I wish that I could say something worse of so nasty a practice; an uncleanness, a filthiness, forbidden by GOD, an unmanliness despised by men.'¹³ Alex Comfort, who made a study of attitudes to masturbation in the nineteenth century, states the circumcision was increasingly used to combat it: 'The eighteenth and early nineteenth century, believing masturbation to be a harmful as well as sinful practice, attempted to cure it, but from 1850 to 1879 surgical measures become increasingly popular.'¹⁴

A common theory of the origin of circumcision is that it was designed to diminish interest in sex and thus to remove a barrier to concentration on religion. Comfort noted that Renaissance medical writers had believed the foreskin contributed greatly to sexual pleasure, and Paget held a similar view. William Acton agreed with Paget but went on to imply that it would be a good thing if all infants were therefore circumcised: 'Admitting, as I do, that this distinguished physiologist is right in the abstract, I am still of the opinion that the prepuce in man (at least in civilized life) is the cause of much mischief, and that we could well spare that organ.'¹⁵ It would therefore seem clear that, in the period in which the novel is set, circumcision would not have been identified solely with Jews since it would commonly have been performed in cases of phimosis, to combat masturbation, for hygienic reasons at least among those aware of health benefits or to diminish interest in sex generally.

How does this historical investigation of circumcision affect the interpretation of *Daniel Deronda*? A recurrent theme in Eliot's fiction is the tension between sign and meaning; all signs need to be interpreted, and even what may appear to be the most obvious sign can be misinterpreted: 'Signs are small measurable things, but interpretations are illimitable', as *Middlemarch* puts it. This theme is also present in *Daniel Deronda*, particularly in connection with Deronda: 'Both Emperor and Rabbi were wrong in their trust of outward signs: poverty and poor clothes are no sign of inspiration, said Deronda to his inward objector, but they have gone with it in some remarkable cases' (*DD*, 437). Deronda, who is subject to 'oppressive scepticism' (*DD*, 534), is represented as being

aware that signs do not possess immanent meaning and that an individual's desires shape his or her reading of signs. Although circumcision could not be mentioned specifically, I would suggest that its main role is as an ambiguous sign for Deronda. Thinking of the matter from his point of view, he cannot know what his being circumcised signifies, though being of Jewish origin must be a possibility. In Chase's interpretation, in contrast – somewhat ironically since deconstruction normally emphasizes the polysemic possibilities of the signifier – circumcision functions as an unambiguous sign of Jewishness.

There is nothing in Deronda's life up until his chance encounter with Mirah to connect him with Jews, apart from circumcision. Since circumcision could be performed for other reasons, Deronda has no reason to believe it to be an unequivocal sign of Jewishness. Not that this possibility would have been welcome to someone of his upbringing, as he possesses some popular prejudices about Jews: 'Deronda could not escape (who can?) knowing ugly stories of Jewish characteristics and occupations' (*DD*, 176). He worries about the consequences of tracing Mirah's brother, but there is also a suggestion of personal fear on his part for he must know that circumcision is a Jewish rite: 'In his anxiety about Mirah's relatives, he had lately been thinking of vulgar Jews with a sort of personal alarm' (*DD*, 309).

However, Deronda believes that the strongest probability is that Sir Hugo Mallinger is his father. It is the sudden realization that he could be Sir Hugo's illegitimate son which makes him aware of the ambiguous nature of signs when he is compelled to make 'a new mental survey of familiar facts' (*DD*, 205). Even if Sir Hugo is his father, circumcision could still be a sign of Jewishness if his unknown mother was a Jew. Or it could simply be a sign without significant meaning: that he suffered from phimosis as an infant or that his doctor believed in circumcision as a health safeguard. It could also have sexual significance. Deronda's first doubt about his identity occurs in the context of sexual excess and licence: his question to his tutor about why popes and cardinals had so many nephews. He then thinks it almost certain that he was the product of such excess. What therefore could his having been circumcised signify in such a context? Might his circumcision be a sign that it was feared that he might inherit the excessive sexual desires of one or both of his parents and that this step was taken to lessen this possibility. William Acton believed that children could inherit strong sexual passions from their parents: 'Early voluptuous ideas ... are ... traceable to the brain; and I believe, heritable, like many other qualities, from parents who have not held the animal passions in any sort of check.'¹⁶ Circumcision, then, offers many possibilities for ambiguity of meaning in Deronda's situation, and several of his characteristics can be interpreted as understandable responses to this ambiguity: such as his apprehensiveness at the thought of 'vulgar' Jews and his dread at finding out the truth about his parentage. His anxiety about his identity is made psychologically credible since this sign could mean both so much and so little.

If circumcision is seen as part of the theme of the ambiguity of signs, this helps to dispose of a difficulty that has often been said to undermine the credibility of the plot: that Deronda should turn out to have been born into a Jewish family and so be able to fulfil the role that Mordecai has created for him is seen as too contrived and convenient to be reconcilable with the novel's realism. For Chase it is a 'magical metamorphosis' that 'exceeds the limits of realistic narrative'. Her view that normal causality is inverted in the novel seems attractive, though the novel itself alludes to causality being inverted in Hans Meyrick's letter to Deronda. The root of the problem, however, is in Deronda's attitude to Mordecai's claim that he is a Jew in terms of his racial origins. There is no difficulty in accounting for Mordecai's belief in it, since he possesses the visionary expectation that someone will come to carry on his work. Deronda must also have something of the physical appearance of a Jew. We are told he is dark, for example, but again the signs are ambiguous since his face is 'not more distinctively oriental than many a type seen among what we call the Latin races' (*DD*, 425). If there is no evidence whatever to support Mordecai's belief that Deronda is a Jew, it is difficult to understand, from a realist standpoint, why he should resolve to fulfil Mordecai's idealistic hopes if he can, since for Mordecai he must be a Jew by race to do so. That he should then turn out to be a Jew seems to be the product of the author's will and not a credible working out of events.

However, if Deronda is circumcised, he must be aware that he has something in common with Jews, and since he does not know for sure the truth about his parentage, it must of course be possible that he has Jewish origins. There is a suggestion that he is not totally surprised by Mordecai's claim that he is a Jew even if he thinks it unlikely. He does not dismiss it as absurd or bizarre: 'The claim hung, too, on a supposition which might be – nay, probably was – in discordance with the full fact: the supposition that he, Deronda, was of Jewish blood. Was there ever a more hypothetic appeal?' (*DD*, 436). To say only that Mordecai 'might be' or 'probably' was wrong is odd if there is nothing whatever to connect Deronda with Jews. And the only possible personal link he could have had with Jews before Mirah encouraged his interest in them is circumcision. But circumcision is not proof that he is a Jew, much as he would like to be one after encountering Mordecai, a man capable of providing him with the aim in life he has been seeking. Deronda is, however, well aware how easily desire influences interpretation and that signs can be misread. But if he is circumcised his willingness to comply with Mordecai's 'hypothetic' belief, at least provisionally, and his turning out actually to be a Jew are reasonable and probable and therefore easily reconcilable with realist narrative. Consequently, the plot can be defended both against the claims of those who believe it undermines the canons of conventional realism and against Chase's deconstructionist critique.

Where the plot of *Daniel Deronda* is different from Eliot's previous novels is that – like Shakespeare in *The Winter's Tale*, which plays a part in the novel – she

departs from her usual practice when she conceals from the reader the essential element of the plot, that Deronda is of Jewish origin, until more than half way through. But one of Eliot's innovations in *Daniel Deronda* is to incorporate within her mode of realism some aspects of the 'sensation novel', which defers revealing information fundamental to the narrative but may also leave clues which an attentive reader could pick up. Though circumcision does not seem to have occurred to the novel's readers for around a hundred years – which suggests a limited perception of Eliot as a writer since it was apparently inconceivable that she could deal with such a subject – it can be argued that it is indirectly alluded to in the text, especially in Chapter 16 when the question of his origins strikes Deronda forcibly. Its implied presence makes Deronda's sense of estrangement more dramatically convincing, otherwise, as T. S. Eliot remarked of Hamlet, Deronda's emotional disturbance may seem 'in *excess* of the facts as they appear'.¹⁷ Believing that it is highly likely that he is the illegitimate son of Sir Hugo yet also being circumcised credibly creates the fear that he might be different in some fundamental way from Sir Hugo and his class. Circumcision becomes a sign of difference, and though he cannot be sure of its meaning, it fills him with dread:

If his father had been wicked – Daniel inwardly used strong words, for he was feeling the injury done him as a maimed boy feels the crushed limb which for others is merely reckoned in an average of accidents – if his father had done any wrong, he wished it might never be spoken of to him: it was already a cutting thought that such knowledge might be in other minds. (*DD*, 144)

This imagery of being maimed and wounded is used several times, the phrase 'cutting thought' being particularly resonant. Other examples are as follows: 'he would never bring himself near even a silent admission of the sore that had opened in him' (*DD*, 145); 'A surprise that came to him before his first vacation, strengthened the silent consciousness of a grief within, which might be compared in some ways with Byron's susceptibility about his deformed foot' (*DD*, 147); and perhaps most strikingly, 'The sense of an entailed disadvantage – the deformed foot doubtfully hidden by the shoe, makes a restlessly active spiritual yeast, and easily turns a self-centred, unloving nature into an Ishmaelite' (*DD*, 148). Although Deronda's nature is of 'the rarer sort' that resists such distortion, the reference to 'Ishmaelite', with its connotation of both Jew – Ishmael being a son of Abraham – and outcast provides a clue to his situation, and at this point in the novel, especially in the context of imagery of maiming, injury and deformity, the only characteristic that could clearly connect Deronda with Jewishness is circumcision.

Chase's general view of the novel, that the 'triumph of idealism over irony is written into the very structure of the novel's double plot',¹⁸ is fundamentally conventional in seeing the novel as structurally flawed. Clearly, as Chase implies, such idealism is suspect if it is dependent on disregarding circumcision.

But, if circumcision is seen as indirectly present, one can take a different view of the relation between idealism and irony in the novel. Although idealism is not subverted, irony is still allowed its place. In a novel in which Romantic preoccupations are so much in evidence, one should not be surprised that Romantic irony is incorporated into the narrative structure. Circumcision is relevant to this since it casts an ironical light on Deronda's Jewishness and on the concept of cause, which assumes that there is equilibrium or logical relation between cause and effect. The exalted role Mordecai envisages for Deronda as the bearer of 'the sacred inheritance of the Jew' (*DD*, 428) and Deronda's hopeful identification with it are for Mordecai dependent on Deronda's being a Jew by race, yet at first the only attribute that associates him with Jewishness is circumcision, which at first he cannot securely interpret. The deep-seated human desire for causal order and proportion, both in the world and in narrative, is mocked by the disequilibrium that exists between the triviality of this sign and the magnitude of the consequences that may (or may not if it was done merely for hygienic reasons or to inhibit infant masturbation) follow from it.

There can, of course, be no conclusive proof that Eliot intended circumcision to be a signifying presence in the novel, unless documentary evidence is discovered.¹⁹ But clearly the novel itself raises the subject and critics must decide which of the three attitudes that it is possible to have towards it is most defensible: namely that it is a signifying presence, a signifying absence or performs no signifying function. My argument that it is a signifying presence undermines the still common view that Eliot's fiction embodies Victorian high-mindedness and moral earnestness and accepts the constraints that operated upon the imagination of the novelist during the Victorian period. It is difficult to reconcile this image of her with circumcision being indirectly signified in *Daniel Deronda* and clues being provided to its presence. The role of circumcision, I would suggest, points to an element of comic playfulness in the text which coexists with its serious themes but which Eliot's Victorian image has generally prevented readers from noticing.²⁰