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Looking for Mr. Right: The Two Suitors Formula in George Eliot's *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866)

Abstract

The article seeks to analyse the deployment of the two suitors formula, which was perfected by Jane Austen (and thus is sometimes called “the Austenian romance”) in a somewhat under-researched novel by George Eliot entitled *Felix Holt: the Radical*. The article presents the formula and its consequences for characterisation and analyses the three main characters in Eliot's novel with regard to the convention, paying special attention to the contrasting characterisation of the two romantic rivals, Harold Transome and Felix Holt, and to the characterisation of the novel's heroine. The article also analyses George Eliot's references to the heroine's reading tastes, which can be seen both as an element of characterisation and an interpretative clue, allowing careful readers to predict the development of the plot.

Key words: George Eliot, *Felix Holt: The Radical*, Jane Austen, Victorian novel, romance

In December 2015, *The Guardian* announced the results of a poll entitled “The greatest British novel of all time.” The methodology behind the poll was interesting, as the results were not decided by a vote of *The Guardian* readers or by a representative sample of the British population, but by 81 distinguished literary critics from around the world, excluding the UK (Flood 8). Thus, the results show which British novels are perceived as the greatest in the eyes of international literary critics. According to the poll, the greatest British novel of all time is George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1870) – a verdict that sparked new interest in the novel and its author. For many decades now, George Eliot has been revered as the quintessential Victorian realist, but was not often read for pleasure by non-academic readers, who often found the length of her novels and her reputation of a highly intellectual writer intimidating or even off-putting.¹

However, recent research into George Eliot's *oeuvre* often explores hitherto neglected aspects of her art, such as her relationship with popular fiction, especially the Gothic (cf. Mahawate) or the romance (cf. Levine), changing the popular perception of this canonical Victorian author. In my paper, I would like to explore one aspect of George Eliot's relationship with popular novels, namely her deployment of the two suitors

1 An exemplification of this attitude to George Eliot can be found e.g. in an article entitled “First rule of book club: Don't read *Middlemarch*!” (Andrews).

convention (also called “the Austenian romance”) in her somewhat forgotten novel entitled *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866), which directly precedes *Middlemarch*.

The year 2016 marks the 150th anniversary of the novel’s publication, which led to a slight renewal of critical interest, but *Felix Holt* is decidedly (and for a good reason) ranked as a minor novel in George Eliot’s *oeuvre*: if it is studied at all, it is mostly to provide comparison to its brilliant direct successor *Middlemarch*. In fact, it is a longstanding critical contention (e.g. Hardy) that *Felix Holt* was Eliot’s “trial run” before the latter novel, and that one can trace in it the germs of ideas and techniques that Eliot later refined and redeployed, with resounding success, in her masterpiece. The standard critical approaches to *Felix Holt* focus on its political and philosophical content, which is understandable as the text is often termed “George Eliot’s political novel.”² In a recent essay for *The Guardian*, written in celebration of the novel’s anniversary, Eliot’s biographer Kathryn Hughes concedes that *Felix Holt* “remains the awkward middle child [...having] none of the bucolic charm of Eliot’s early work (*Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner*) and none of the powerful complexity of the later (*Middlemarch*, *Daniel Deronda*)” (Hughes n.pag.) but argues that, in the grim and uncertain post-Brexit reality the novel startlingly gains renewed topicality:

What a difference context makes. For *Felix Holt*’s 150th anniversary happens to fall at the very moment when Britain is scrambling to deal with political Armageddon. Set in the months following the passing of the 1832 Reform Act, the novel asks uncomfortable questions about the wisdom of putting the nation’s fate in the hands of people who believe their interests lie far from your own. Put simply: can democracy be relied upon to get the answer right? And, if the answer is no, then what does that reveal about the deep chasm that divides one part of society from another? Eliot wouldn’t have known the phrase “haves and have-nots” but she would have grasped what it meant, and she already knew why it mattered. (Hughes n.pag)

Hughes’s interpretation of the novel, linking the politics of *Felix Holt* with recent events is certainly thought-provoking, and the novel’s political agenda might definitely be ripe for critical re-evaluation. Renewed critical interest in Eliot’s “awkward middle child” would be in line with George Levine’s appeal for a renewal of interest in canonical texts, which, according to the distinguished critic, should be interpreted anew as “distinctly less comfortable, quaint, cute and predictable than BBC and film productions have made many people think they are” (Levine vi).

So far, the aspects of *Felix Holt* that received the most of attention (and, as the above quotation from Kathryn Hughes demonstrates, might become the subject of renewed critical scrutiny) were related to the novel’s main theme, politics and the electoral process. In my article, however, I am going to focus on a hitherto

2 Among notable classic approaches to the novel, focusing on its political and ideological aspects, one should mention Raymond Williams’s remarks in *Culture and Society* (1958) and Catherine Gallagher’s, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form 1832–1867* (1985), of which Chapter 9 “The Politics of Culture and the Debate over Representation in 1860s” is especially topical.

under-researched aspect of the novel: on its romantic plot, in the form of a love triangle between the three protagonists.

As I said before, a careful study reveals many connections between *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*, and this fact has not escaped Eliot's critics. It is certainly true that the two novels reveal so many striking affinities that it is tempting to treat the former as a preparation for the latter. The similarities are not only limited to the setting, which in both cases is that of a provincial Midlands town in the early 1830s, but also pertain to both novels' essential moral and intellectual themes. But I would like to argue that *Felix Holt* marks the beginning of George Eliot's interest in Austenian romance, a type of novel whose plot centres around the heroine's quest for a happy marriage. Eliot first used the Austenian formula in *Felix Holt*, and then redeployed it with much more complexity in *Middlemarch* and her last novel, *Daniel Deronda* (1876).

In the course of an Austenian romance, the heroine interacts with eligible men, one of whom is finally revealed to be her true mate. In the novel's *dénouement*, the protagonist's principal rival is usually revealed to be in some way flawed and not worthy of the heroine. The Austenian romance is not unlike a detective story in that the plot is determined by the need to control the reader's expectations, and to achieve an ending which will be both satisfactory and surprising. Jean Kennard thus summarizes the main features of this type of romance:

[Austen] adapted the formula of the female quixotic novel in which a young girl learns to abandon a view of the world based on fantasy and to adjust herself to reality. The heroine's adjustment to reality is seen as an indication of her maturity. Jane Austen incorporates within this basic structure the characters from the novel of sensibility and uses two of them in particular, the unscrupulous or "wrong" suitor and the "right" suitor, as touchstones of value in her heroine's progress towards maturity [...]. The growth of the heroine in a Jane Austen novel is marked by her choice of the "right" suitor over the "wrong" suitor. The "wrong" suitor represents the qualities which the heroine must reject; the "right" suitor those which, in Jane Austen's view, make for a good life. So Elizabeth Bennet must recognize the weakness of Wickham and the virtues of Darcy; Emma the shallowness of Frank Churchill's charm and the true worth of George Knightley [...]. If the heroine makes the wrong choice, she usually dies. The convention is often more subtly used than my statements suggest – Frank Churchill is not quite bereft of redeeming qualities [...], but the skeleton is invariably the same and remains the same in a great number of nineteenth-century novels which take the development of a woman as their central subject. (Kennard 24)

The indebtedness of Jane Austen to two disparate traditions of the novel – the comic (quixotic) and the sentimental³ – is reflected in the perceptible duality in the portrayals

3 Specifically, Kennard's term "the quixotic novel" refers to Charlotte Lennox *The Female Quixote, or, The Adventures of Arabella* (1752), a comic novel whose plot is a clever reworking of Cervantes' main premise. Lennox's heroine, due to excessive reading of love stories, is convinced that she herself possesses all qualities of a typical romance heroine and that every man she meets falls in love with her. In the course of the novel, Arabella gradually casts off these illusions and her resulting conformity to social norms is rewarded with a suitable marriage. The second type of novel referenced by Kennard is "the novel of sensibility," more commonly known as "the sentimental

of heroines. In the expository parts of the novels, the mode of characterization is usually comical, whereas after the heroine's "transition from romance to realism" (Kennard 27) and rejection of her illusions, the narratorial tone changes to more sympathetic, and the heroine tends to be presented as a victim of circumstances. This pattern is also valid for *Felix Holt*, and was later further developed by Eliot in *Middlemarch*.

Naturally, *Felix Holt*, and the epic, multiplot *Middlemarch* cannot be reduced to simply retreading the two suitors formula. But an analysis of the novels' main plots makes it evident that they utilize the pattern delineated by Jane Austen's novels. Writing over fifty years after Jane Austen, and for a much more sophisticated reading public, George Eliot was confronted with the inevitable problem of instilling interest and suspense into the plot. Apart from the psychological suspense, related to the romantic subplot, both novels also rely on suspense of the more ordinary kind, reminiscent of fashionable sensation novels of the period. Namely, they both feature secrets from the past, whose existence offers possibilities for blackmail or dramatic unveiling.

In *Felix Holt, the Radical*, apart from the psychological suspense generated by the two suitors formula, in which the heroine, Esther Lyon, has to choose between the wealthy but morally suspect Harold Transome and the poor but honest Felix Holt, there also exists a more melodramatic source of suspense, associated with the figure of Harold's mother. Mrs Transome is a suffering woman with a guilty secret, always dreading exposure. The mystery, when it is finally revealed, turns out to be worthy of a sensation novel. Mrs Transome's son and heir is revealed to be illegitimate, which not only causes him to lose his position in society, but also makes forfeit his right to the family money. In a surprising final twist, predicated on the niceties of the law of entail, the Transome estate is then revealed to belong to no other but Esther Lyon.

The two suitors formula in *Felix Holt* is not only intertwined with the sensational elements, but is also to a certain degree obscured by the novel's political agenda. The novel is often referred to as "George Eliot's political novel," and it is undeniably true that a large part of its plot revolves around political issues (Rignall 115). It was written and published in the period preceding the Second Reform Act of 1867, and set shortly after the Great Reform Act of 1832, in the time of fierce political struggle surrounding the election organized after the first considerable extension of suffrage. The titular hero becomes the author's *porte-parole*, expounding George Eliot's social and political beliefs. The novel's reception upon first publication was positive, though it was not an overwhelming success in terms of sales. Uncharacteristically for the period, *Felix Holt* was not published in instalments, but appeared originally in a three volume edition.

Interestingly, in spite of the disappointing sales, the character of Felix Holt, an honest and ardent working man, took some hold of the collective imagination. A year after the novel was published, the publisher John Blackwood convinced Eliot to revisit

novel." The heavily conventionalized and formulaic plots of sentimental novels usually had at their core the prototypical "damsel in distress," an innocent and unprotected heroine of ambiguous social status, who became the subject of unsolicited attentions of a villain, and was finally rescued by the noble hero. Fanny Burney's *Evelina* (1778) and Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) constitute classic examples of this type of fiction.

this character, and write an article for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* entitled "Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt" (1868), in which Felix would offer newly enfranchised voters advice and instruction, urging common sense and disparaging rash action and change for change's sake.

An appraisal of Felix Holt's radicalism remains the crux of the novel's criticism. To modern readers, the protagonist often seems smug and sanctimonious, but in as much as we can determine her authorial intentions, George Eliot meant him to be an unequivocally positive character, an attractive role model for working men who had recently obtained the right to vote, a realist version of "the industrious apprentice" figure which she had earlier depicted somewhat ironically in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). The fact that Eliot used Felix as her *porte-parole* in the "Address to Working Men" serves as an indirect proof of her intentions. Perhaps understandingly, the twentieth century criticism often found fault with Holt's political agenda and sought to undermine his image as a role model. The critical consensus seems to be that in the case of Felix Holt, Eliot's moralistic zeal overrode her artistic sensibility (Hardy 208).

Felix's political radicalism in the novel seems to be strangely cautious and his precise beliefs very vague (Carroll 115–117). Henry James was the first to complain that the characterization of the titular hero is not up to Eliot's usual standards:

[...] Considering their importance, he and his principles play so brief a part and are so often absent from the scene. He is distinguished for his excellent good sense. He is uncompromising yet moderate, eager yet patient, earnest yet unimpassioned. He is indeed a thorough young Englishman, and, in spite of his sincerity, his integrity, his intelligence, and his broad shoulders, there is nothing in his figure to *thrill* the reader. (Carroll 275; emphasis in the original)

James' catalogue of Felix Holt's virtues is ironic in a similar vein as George Eliot's own description of the ideal novel heroine in her essay "Silly Novels By Lady Novelists."⁴ Interestingly, though she had ridiculed the idealized depictions of the charms of the silly novels' heroines, her own admiring descriptions of Felix's physique in turn courted James' derision. While there are many indications that Eliot's heroines can be interpreted as a reaction against the stereotyped portrayals of female characters in novels, it is more difficult to prove that Felix Holt is an ironic version of a popular type of a working class character, often called "the virtuous apprentice."

The fact that Eliot reused this character in the "Address to Working Men" suggests that she intended him as a role model for the working classes. And yet, many of his features seem dubious. Felix's first appearance in the novel is prepared by the description of Mr Lyon's conversation with his mother, who asks the minister to reason with her son on account of his "wild and contrary" behaviour (56). We learn that Felix has recently come back home from university in Glasgow and scandalized his mother

4 In "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" (1856) published in *A Westminster Review*, Eliot ridiculed the standard heroine of a society novel, "the ideal woman in feelings, faculties and flounces [...] perfectly well-dressed and perfectly religious" and urged writers to create more realistic female characters (Eliot, "Silly Novels" 296).

when he forbade her to sell quack medicines. Thus, disregarding obvious differences of class and social standing, the situation of the Holts is presented as parallel to that of the Transomes. Harold Transome, who will become the third personage in the novel's love triangle, similarly scandalizes his staunchly conservative mother when, upon arrival in England, he declares his intention to run as a Radical candidate in the upcoming election. This is the first instance of Eliot's experiments with parallel plots. She will subsequently deploy the same device much more subtly and successfully in her last two novels, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*.

Thus, in the first chapters of *Felix Holt*, the readers witness homecomings of two sons, who shock their mothers with their unexpected actions. Because Mrs Holt is so evidently a garrulous and ignorant character, the readers may expect that her opinions should be treated with a pinch of salt. If she disapproves of her son, then we may safely infer that his actions are commendable. However, during the first meeting with Mr Lyon, Felix cuts a rather unattractive figure, giving ample proofs of impetuosity and arrogance. When Felix and Esther first meet, they pose an enigma to one another – he is astonished that “the minister's daughter was not the sort of person he expected” and is offended by her “fine lady ways” (67) and Esther, on the other hand, cannot reconcile Felix's self-assurance and his educated way of speaking with his disregard for social conventions and humble occupation. The narrator's insistence on Holt's superiority is mainly declarative, and a close analysis of his actual behaviour makes its assessment more equivocal.

Alexander Welsh draws attention to the fact that, when asked about the reasons for his “conversion,” that led to forbidding his mother to sell her medicines, Felix blurts out: “I was converted by six weeks' debauchery” and then gives some vague but sordid details:

If I had not seen that I was making a hog of myself very fast [...]. I should never have looked life fairly in the face [...]. I laughed out loud at last to think of a poor devil like me, in a Scotch garret, with my stockings out at heel and a shilling or two to be dissipated on, with a smell of raw haggis mounting from below, and old women breathing gin as they passed me on the stairs – wanting to turn my life into easy pleasure. (62)

Welsh further muses: “Holt never says whether the six weeks were enjoyable or otherwise but just recites the fact as information about himself. By threatening to tell about it, he forces himself to behave perhaps. In some ways he is a representative Victorian” (Welsh 215). It seems evident that by exposing – without the slightest need or provocation – his earlier transgressions, Felix perpetrates a serious breach of Victorian code of propriety.

Likewise, Holt's creator, George Eliot, by making this blunt reference to prostitution, goes against the established Dickensian convention of describing prostitution in sentimental and melodramatic rather than realistic terms. Holt's transgression also establishes another subtle parallel between him and Harold, as the latter in due course will reveal to Esther that his late Oriental wife had originally been his slave. Curiously, both men's previous sexual experiences, however transgressive according to Victorian moral codes, also qualify them for the roles of protagonists in a romance, in accordance with A.D. Nuttall's perceptive observation that “it is noticeable that fictional

dream-men, wish fulfilment heroes in books written by women, are again and again endowed by their authors with a previous erotic life [...]. Rochester in *Jane Eyre* has a continental past" (Nuttall 48).

Felix's self-righteousness and energy after his enigmatic "conversion," mark him as a descendant of the "industrious apprentice" type, but his subsequent relations with Esther are also in some measure modelled on the blueprint of "the rough lover" that came into fashion with the publication of *Jane Eyre* in 1847. After the publication of Charlotte Brontë's novel many reviewers noticed a tendency, especially prevalent among women writers, to introduce protagonists who "have a decided family resemblance. They are not conventionally handsome, and often are downright ugly; they have piercing eyes; they are brusque and cynical in speech, impetuous in action. Thrilling the heroine with their rebellion and power, they simultaneously appeal to her reforming energies" (Showalter 140).

Barring the narratorial emphasis on his good looks, Felix's brusque manners suggest that he might belong to the "rough lover" school. However, what sets him apart from those Rochester-like heroes are his moral principles. All the same, Felix undeniably owes some of his features to the "rough lover" stereotype: for example, there is a curious streak of sadism in his relations with Esther. When they argue during their first encounter, Felix passionately wishes: "I should like to come and scold her every day, and make her cry and cut her fine hair off" (72). Later he voices all his objections and pleads with her to change her life and forego her egoism and vanity:

I want you to change. Of course I am a brute to say so. I ought to say you are perfect. Another man would, perhaps [...]. You don't care to be better than a bird trimming its feathers, and pecking about after what pleases it. You are discontented with the world because you can't get just the small things that suit your pleasure, not because it's a world where myriads of men and women are ground by wrong and misery, and tainted with pollution. (123)

Esther first reacts to Felix's sermon with indignation that is consistent with her psychological portrayal. Her initial reaction is a revolt against his assumption of superiority, but she soon convinces herself that "his indignant words were a tribute to her: he thought she was worth more pains than the women of whom he took no notice" (125). Felix's rebukes and accusations of shallowness serve as a stimulus that starts the process of Esther's emotional and spiritual growth – and they also trigger her romantic interest in the protagonist, which is at first presented in a very opaque way: "She had begun to find [Felix] amusing, and also rather irritating to her woman's love of conquest" (119). The same relationship between the protagonists, where the hero finds fault with the heroine's behaviour and takes pains to reform her, also features in Jane Austen's *Emma*.⁵

Within the Austenian romance paradigm, as exemplified by *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, it is customary for the protagonists not to realize that they are falling in love with one another until relatively late in the novel. This characteristic differentiates

5 A comprehensive analysis of the "lover as teacher" formula can be found in Jean Kennard's *Victims of Convention* (1978).

the Austenian romance from other types of love stories, where mutual love of the main characters is a driving force of the plot, and where protagonists have to conquer external obstacles that prevent their union (Cawelti 87–90).

The essence of the Austenian romance lies in the fact that the reader witnesses the heroine's quest for the perfect mate, and consequently the plot structure of the novel requires introduction of other eligible male characters that serve the function of "red herrings." Creating characters such as Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice* and Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen established the blueprint of the "wrong suitor" formula.⁶ The "wrong suitor" should initially seem more attractive and flamboyant than the real protagonist and seemingly better suited to the heroine. His inherent unsuitability should only be revealed towards the end of the novel, and should come as a surprise, forcing the readers to re-evaluate their impressions of the character, in a manner similar to that in which a reader of a crime story has to re-think the plot after the final dénouement and find the clues that had hitherto been latent. An analysis of the plot of *Felix Holt* in this light reveals the novel to be a fairly traditional romance in the Austenian tradition.

As a logical consequence of the above plot requirements, the initial contacts between the three protagonists in Eliot's novel are designed to confuse the reader. As I said before, during their first contacts Esther is indignant of Felix's patronizing tone, and Felix himself is adamant that he shall never marry because the necessity to provide for his family might lead to compromising his ideals:

I'll never marry though I should have to live on raw turnips to subdue my flesh. I'll never look back and say, "I had a fine purpose once – I meant to keep my hands clean and my soul upright, and to look truth in the face, but pray excuse me, I have a wife and children – I must lie and simper a little, else they'll starve," or, "My wife is nice, she must have her bread well buttered, and her feelings will be hurt if she is not thought genteel." That is the lot Miss Esther is preparing for some man or other. (74)

Interestingly, Eliot's next novel, *Middlemarch*, describes the fulfilment of this depressing scenario, in the story of the unhappy marriage of Dr. Lydgate and Rosamond Vincy. In *Felix Holt*, however, Esther finally proves to be a worthy bride and helpmate. Her moral and intellectual development constitutes an important theme in the novel. The events described in *Felix Holt* span just six months, and in this period Esther undergoes a radical transformation from a narcissist snob, who resents her father's poverty, into a brave and selfless woman.

In the expository chapters, Esther is presented as self-centred and obsessed with appearances. Living very frugally with her father, she is forced to work as a day-governess, and spends all her money on small items of luxury, forever hankering after elegance and refinement.

Esther's own mind was not free from a sense of irreconcilableness between the objects of her taste and the conditions of her lot. She knew that Dissenters were looked down

6 The application of this formula in Jane Austen's novels is analyzed in detail in Chapter 1 of Jean Kennard's *Victims of Convention*.

upon by those whom she regarded as the most refined classes; her favourite companions, both in France and at an English school where she had been a junior teacher, had thought it quite ridiculous to have a father who was a Dissenting preacher [...]. She was proud that the best-born and handsomest girls at school had always said that she might be taken for a born lady. (76–7)

Throughout the novel, Eliot generally pays a lot of attention to the description of Esther's personal possessions and clothes, but focuses especially on describing her reading tastes. She uses the references to Esther's favourite books as a kind of intellectual metonymy, allowing the readers' to treat the books as the basis of their opinions about Esther's personality. Esther's reading is unabashedly escapist (and also somewhat risqué for a young woman of her times (cf. Flint 110–114)) and consists mostly of Lord Byron and other Romantic poets.

But the characters' reading in the novel is not only a vehicle of characterisation: it also provides material for judging their moral credentials. The first conflict between Esther and Felix occurs when he sees her reading Byron and promptly launches a vigorous attack on the poet, calling him "a misanthropic debauchee [...] whose notion of a hero was that he should disorder his stomach and despise mankind" and exclaiming, "His corsairs and renegades, his Alps and Manfreds, are the most paltry puppets that were ever pulled by the strings of lust and pride" (69). Felix's outspoken critique of Byron's escapism and self-indulgence mirrors George Eliot's own opinion on the poet, expressed two years after the publication of *Felix Holt* in a letter to Sarah Hennel, dated 21 September 1869. In the letter, she discusses a controversial article by Harriet Beecher Stowe from the September issue of *Atlantic Monthly* that unearthed gossip about Byron's incestuous relationship with his cousin. Eliot writes:

As for the Byron subject, nothing can outweigh to my mind the heavy social injury of familiarising young minds with the desecration of family ties. The discussion of the subject in newspapers, periodicals and pamphlets is simply odious to me [...]. As to the high-flown stuff which is being reproduced about Byron and his poetry, I am utterly out of sympathy with it. He is the most *vulgar-minded* genius that ever produced great effect on literature. (Haight 366; emphasis in the original)

Though this particular outburst of indignation was caused by revelations concerning Byron's private life that were not yet published during the composition of *Felix Holt*, in an earlier letter, written before the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's article, in August 1869, and addressed to Cara Bray, Eliot also says, "Byron and his poetry have become more and more repugnant to me of late years" (Haight 360).

To drive the point home, in *Felix Holt* the narrator repeatedly reminds the reader that Esther nourishes her imagination with escapist Romantic fictions, such as Byron's *The Dream*, which she conceals from her father in her elegant frilly workbasket, and which Felix finds, or Chateaubriand's *René*. The mention of these specific texts is meant as an interpretative clue for the readers of Eliot's novel. On one level, Esther's reading choices can be seen as staple Romantic fare: they feature transgressive and tormented protagonists and, in each case, an incestuous love for a sister or a cousin is revealed to be the source of the hero's misery.

I would like to suggest that these literary allusions to incestuous love in *Felix Holt* are not a coincidence, and were utilised by Eliot as a subtle hint for her readers. When early in the novel it is revealed that Mr Lyon is not Esther's true father – and that the circumstances of her father's death are mysterious – a reader who is well-versed in sensation and melodrama can suppose that Esther could turn out to be a close relative of Harold. George Eliot seems to sanction this conjecture leaving another subtle clue in the form of several allusions to the wild and dissipated life led by Harold's older brother Durfey, whose untimely death gave Harold his title to the estate. This fact, in conjunction with the allusions to incest, could suggest to avid readers of sensation fiction some sinister scenario of mistaken identity. The novel's *dénouement* firmly negates this possibility – but the fact that in spite of the carefully planted clues Esther *does not* turn out to be Harold's niece comes as a surprise.

In his analysis of the blackmail motif in the novel, Alexander Welsh unearths another subtle hint:

Buried among the literary allusions in the novel is the slightest of possible clues: the Debarry sisters have just finished reading Bulwer's *Eugene Aram*, a novel of 1832 in which a former accomplice in crime preys on the hero's present reputation. (Welsh 205)

Unlike other devices employed by Eliot, whose aim is to obfuscate the real solution of the novel's mysteries, the mention of Bulwer Lytton's book points to the true explanation. It is however hidden amid a sea of red herrings, and as such it can only be properly appreciated upon re-reading.

Apart from their use as narrative decoys, references to Romantic poetry in *Felix Holt* also play a more straightforward role as elements of characterisation. Just like *Sense and Sensibility's* heroine Marianne Dashwood, with whom she shares her reading tastes, Esther indulges in escapist fantasies of all-defying passion. Consequently, the two "red herring" suitor figures, Willoughby and Harold Transome, will possess many qualities of the Romantic lover that the heroines believe to be indispensable in a prospective husband. Knowing about Esther's early contacts with Harold, and knowing about her materialism, snobbery and her Romantic and escapist reading tastes, the readers may assume that she will feel drawn to Harold on account of his wealth, social standing and Oriental past, the latter of which would certainly appeal to an admirer of Byron. In accordance with the Austenian formula, Harold is a "theoretically perfect" spouse for Esther.

In the novels' *dénouements*, however, Esther, just like Austen's heroine Marianne Dashwood, will make a matrimonial choice at variance with her professed Romantic creed, proving that the process of their moral and intellectual growth is complete. George Eliot takes the Austenian formula even further: in *Felix Holt* it is not just the heroine's romantic notions that will undergo a transformation. The process of change will encompass Esther's whole life.

In the expository chapters Esther has all the marks of an egoist, a shallow provincial girl obsessed with appearances. George Eliot will revisit the same type of character twice more in her work, creating Rosamond Vincy in *Middlemarch* and Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda*. Unlike Rosamond, and like Gwendolen, Esther will however develop

emotionally and morally in the course of the novel, finally proving her worthiness by the selfless decision to give evidence during Felix's trial and by relinquishing her claim to the Transome estates.

In accordance with the two suitors formula, the heroine's revelation of her feelings for the right suitor must come during some sort of a crisis. In *Felix Holt*, the crisis forms a very organic part of the plot and is well-rooted in the novel's political agenda. Felix is arrested for leading a riot on Election Day and charged with manslaughter because a drunken man was accidentally killed by the angry mob. In reality, Felix was trying to stop people from acts of violence, by leading them away from the town. Curiously, George Eliot seems to have lost her usual psychological insight when describing Felix's behaviour during the riot (although the portrayal of the riot itself is very skilfully done). The deep irony of the fact that Felix was arrested for leading a riot he had in fact been trying to stop is never exploited, and, surprisingly, both Felix and Esther seem to unquestioningly accept his imprisonment for the crime he did not commit.⁷ During the trial, Esther grasps that there are no witnesses present who could testify that Felix went into town that day with the intention of reasoning with the rioters rather than inciting them to violence. She decides to come forward and describe a visit that Felix paid her on the morning of the riot. In doing so, she is aware that her testimony will make her the object of gossip and possibly compromise her reputation, as she will publicly admit that she has met with a young man unchaperoned. Her naïve testimony receives a rather startling universal approval.

When a woman feels purely and nobly, that ardour of hers which breaks through formulas too rigidly urged on men by daily practical needs, makes one of her most precious influences: she is the added impulse that shatters the stiffening crust of cautious experience. Her inspired ignorance gives a sublimity to actions so incongruously simple, that otherwise they would make men smile. [...] There was something so naïve and beautiful in this action of Esther's, that it conquered every low or petty suggestion even in the commonest minds. (447-9)

Esther's appearance in court brings about a near-miraculous reversal of public opinion which seems to be on the verge of parody: Sir Maximus Debarry, an influential local landowner, upon hearing her, instantly exclaims, "That girl made me cry [...]. She's a modest, brave, beautiful woman [...]. Hang it! The fellow's a good fellow if she thinks so" (452). His opinion is shared by Harold and other prominent members of the community, who immediately decide to form a committee and write a petition exonerating Holt in order to bring about his acquittal. Esther's defence of her lover at court thus constitutes a final test of her worth:

The three men in that assembly who knew her best – even her father and Felix Holt – felt a thrill of surprise mingling with their admiration. This bright, delicate, beautiful shaped thing that seemed most like a toy or an ornament – some hand had touched the chords, and there came forth music that brought tears. Half a year before, Esther's

⁷ The point that Felix's meek submission to punishment was out of character is convincingly argued by Arnold Kettle (55).

dread of being ridiculous spread over the surface of her life, but the depth below was sleeping. (449)

After her behaviour at court, it seems inevitable that Esther will renounce her claim on Transome Court. The event is presented with startling brevity: “Harold heard from Esther’s lips that she loved someone else, and that she resigned all claim to the Transome estates” (471). The focus of the narrative now shifts completely from “the wrong suitor” to Esther’s true mate.

In a truly fairy-tale manner, Esther’s renouncement of her fortune loses the character of sacrifice, as the heroine will be compensated with the conventional novelistic reward – the marriage to a worthy man. Elaine Showalter remarks that the heroine’s sacrifice of her wealth in order to marry the hero was a relatively common plot development (Showalter 122).⁸ The formula was well-suited to the dominant Victorian perceptions of gender roles and this fact could perhaps explain its overwhelming popularity in the fiction of the period.

All in all, the plot of *Felix Holt* can be seen as a skilful if somewhat mechanical deployment of Jane Austen’s two suitors formula, complete with a conventional ending in which, after overcoming serious obstacles, the heroine is united with the right suitor. The novel can be seen as George Eliot’s “apprentice work” with regard to the Austenian romance – after the relatively straightforward application of the convention in *Felix Holt*, she re-deployed it in her two final and most complex novels, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, in a much involved and artistically successful manner. A fascinating question, which, however, is likely to become unanswered is whether the ending of *Felix Holt* and Esther’s choice of partner were genuinely surprising for the novel’s first readers. Eliot carefully planted clues suggesting that Esther might make the obvious and socially acceptable choice and marry Harold (and if she did, her decision to marry a wealthy man with a secret for all the wrong reasons would prefigure the disastrous decision made by Dorothea in *Middlemarch*). On the other hand, Victorian readers were well-versed in the Austenian formula, which by the 1860s became the staple love plot, which would make them predisposed to foresee the final twist.

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⁸ An apt illustration of this formula can be found in the *dénouement* of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1855).

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