Title of Paper: **Transgressive Sex and Punishment: Hetty Sorrel and the Penal Colony in Adam Bede**
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Abstract:

This article argues that Hetty Sorrel’s punishment at the end of George Eliot’s novel *Adam Bede* (1859) illustrates the pervasiveness of colonial discourse in the nineteenth century and strengthens the association between dangerous sex and imperialism. In this novel, the penal colony established by the British in Australia serves as the dumping ground for Hetty, the beautiful young woman convicted of killing her child. Hetty’s violent act causes her expulsion from her community and, finally, her expulsion from the text. The article claims, then, that we must acknowledge the role of the Empire in Hetty’s ultimate demise in order to fully understand the ending of Eliot’s first and most popular novel.

Keywords: George Eliot, Victorian, nineteenth-century, novel, British Empire, Hetty Sorrel, penal colonies, emigration, fallen women, Australia

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Readers of British literature tend to associate terms like “Orientalism” and “Imperialism” with writers like Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster, and George Orwell. George Eliot’s name, however, has been less likely to produce discussions of colonial discourse in literary criticism. Although the settings of Eliot’s novels, for the most part, remain firmly planted on English soil, the discourses of colonialism did influence her life and work. In her book *George Eliot and the British Empire*, Nancy Henry notes that even though “authors such as Eliot, Trollope, Dickens, and Thackeray….resisted extending to the colonies their representations of English life…the colonies are present in their fiction. Thackeray was born in India. Eliot, Trollope, and Dickens all sent sons to the colonies. Trollope represented the Australian colonies he had visited, but in the work of Dickens and Eliot colonial spaces constitute the margins of their fictional worlds, simultaneously lands of opportunity and dumping grounds” (20-1). In *Adam Bede* (1859), the penal colony established by the British in Australia serves as the dumping ground for Hetty Sorrel, the beautiful young woman convicted of killing her infant child. Here, I want to argue that Hetty’s punishment illustrates the pervasiveness of colonial discourse, that her punishment emphasizes the connection between dangerous sex and the Empire, and, finally, that we must acknowledge the role of the Empire in Hetty’s ultimate demise in order to fully understand the ending of Eliot’s first novel.

To see how closely this seemingly provincial novel connects to the British Empire, we should first examine Eliot’s connections to it. One way that Eliot encountered the British colonies was through their literary output. Eliot, like many Victorians, read a number of exploration and travel narratives. According to Henry, “This reading established the groundwork of her knowledge about the empire, and textual information was infused later with personal experience of the imperial bureaucracy at home and correspondence with friends and relatives in the colonies” (17). Eliot brought the same critical eye to these works as she did to fiction. She also brought similar aesthetic expectations. In these travel and exploration narratives, she longed for the same “rare, precious quality of truthfulness” that she sought to produce in her own fiction (Eliot 240). Eliot criticized representations of the empire that she did not believe were accurate, and she recognized the dangerous nature of these texts about faraway places since readers, having never been to these lands, would not know how realistic the depictions were.

Eliot did find one of these works of colonial exploration, worth passing on to her sister, however. Eliot’s sister, Chrissey, was left alone with six children and a significant amount of debt after her husband died in 1851. Eliot, and others, believed emigration might offer Chrissey and her children a new start. In order to convince Chrissey that Australia might be a good place for them to go, Eliot sent her a copy of Samuel Sidney’s *The Three Colonies of Australia*. Sidney’s book, and several other publications of his on Australia, were very popular and encouraged emigration to the colonies and provided tips for living there (Stanley). Eliot believed so much in emigration for Chrissey and her children that she offered to go along with them to help get them settled and then return to London. If Chrissey, now without a husband and poor, stayed in England, she would most likely become socially marginalized. Although she would be on the edge of the world geographically in Australia, on the margins of the British Empire, she might escape social shame there. Ultimately,
Chrissey decided against Australia, and she died in 1859. Two of her children, however, later emigrated to Australia and New Zealand (Henry 16). Eliot, after all, never visited Australia or any other British colony overseas.

While Eliot herself never went travelling to the colonies, her money, books, and relatives did. She first purchased shares in The Great Indian Peninsular Railway in 1860 (Henry 4). She would later become a shareholder in The Cape Town Railroad, and the money she earned from these investments supplemented her monetary earnings from writing (1). Her interest in the colonies became more than financial, however. George Henry Lewes, the man with whom Eliot shared over twenty years of her life, had sons who moved to South Africa. Both boys died young: Thornton in 1869 and Herbert in 1875. Before their deaths, Eliot and the boys exchanged letters, and through this correspondence, Eliot learned more about the colony and the British presence there. Even though Eliot’s most significant colonial investments, both financial and familial, occurred after the publishing of Adam Bede, her first novel is not without colonial implications, as the “social conditions that permitted the Lewes boys to end their lives in South Africa, and Eliot to amass a portfolio of colonial stocks, were the same social conditions in which she wrote her fiction—itself a valuable export to the colonies” (Henry 3). These conditions contributed to her desire to focus on common, English people in rural settings (as she turned her readers’ attentions away from distant foreigners to the complex individuals living in their own country). These conditions contributed to her realist aesthetic, and they also provided her with a way to deal with Hetty Sorrel. I do not mean to equate the Lewes boys heading overseas to Hetty’s transportation to Australia, but rather I mean to suggest that the discourse of the colonial enterprise was so pervasive at this time that it even creeps into a story about an orphaned milkmaid, a wealthy landowner, a female Methodist preacher, and a carpenter.

Hetty’s colonial encounter results, of course, from the crime that she commits: infanticide, or child-murder. Her crime is the result of a rather desperate situation. After Hetty has been meeting secretly in the woods with Captain Arthur Donnithorne, she becomes pregnant. This is a serious sexual transgression for both of them, but Hetty, as the poor, young, now pregnant female, will bear the brunt of society’s punishment for their affair. Having hid her pregnancy from her family for some time, she eventually runs away, off to find Arthur, to tell him that she is pregnant and to ask for his help. Before she makes it to him, though, she gives birth. No longer able to conceal her shame, panicked, and feeling helplessly alone, Hetty buries the child in the ground, covering it with dirt and leaves. Hetty is tried for infanticide, found guilty, and sentenced to death. Moments before she is to be executed, however, she is granted a pardon, secured by Arthur who has finally found out about the situation and who has come back into the picture. Her pardon is one from death, not punishment. Her new sentence is transportation to the penal colony in Australia.

When the American colonies earned their independence, Great Britain looked for a new place to send a growing criminal population. Although some penal reformers pushed for new penitentiaries to house criminals in Great Britain, the transportation of prisoners “was a far more appealing alternative” because “it not only was cheap but also promised to reduce crime by the simple expedient of removing criminals” (Hirst 236). Eventually, Australia became the country’s choice destination.
for convicts—both men and women. The first ships of convicts arrived at Botany Bay in 1788, and Australia continued to take in convicted criminals until 1868. Most of those arriving in Australia had been convicted of stealing, and most of them came from urban areas (237). Transported men tended to be seasoned criminals, as they “had usually been before the courts a few times…whereas women were more likely to be transported for a first offence” (“Convicts”). About twenty percent of the convicts transported to Australia were women, and, like the men, most of them were thieves. A very small percentage of female convicts were violent offenders. Of the thousands transported, “only 121 were recorded in the indents as guilty of explicitly violent crimes,” and of that group, “Eighteen convict women had murdered, and a further two had committed infanticide” (Oxley 42). With this evidence in mind, it seems that Hetty would have been an atypical convict, not only because of the violent nature of her crime but also because she did not come from an urban area. This does not mean that Eliot’s choice to send Hetty to Australia is unrealistic; infanticide was a transportable offence at the time, and Australia served as the destination for convicts. Eliot’s plot decision, then, is at least historically accurate—uncommon, but accurate.

A woman’s experience in the penal colony was unique in a number of ways. First, she faced the threat of sexual abuse. Female convicts from this period, for various reasons, have often been painted as prostitutes. Prostitution, however, did not get them transported to Australia as prostitution was not a transportable offence, although some women may have taken up that occupation because of their transportation and the conditions they faced in the penal colony. Some women may have quickly sought out a husband or man to cohabitate with for protection against other men. Although scholars have not always agreed on the sexual status of female convicts in the colony, it is clear that female convicts faced dire circumstances when transported to Australia and that these circumstances were often different than those faced by male convicts. According to Hirst, “the British government” believed that female convicts’ “chief purpose was to serve as sexual partners for the men” (244). These sexual relationships could take place in the context of marriage, but sex could also be an abusive tool or a bargaining chip. Based on the ways men react to Hetty in Eliot’s novel, I would imagine that she would continue to attract men’s sexual attention in Australia as well. After being taken advantage of by a man back in England, it seems entirely possible that she would face a similar situation as a convicted woman far removed from the safety of home.

A woman’s experience in the penal colony was also unique because of her labor. Many women transported to Australia became domestic workers for the free emigrants or government officials living in the colony. This could be a particularly difficult job because they would be under the close watch of their employers:

Employers, who found that female convicts disrupted their households, declared women convicts more depraved than the men. Apparently, masters failed to see that in expecting prompt and cheerful service from a female maid or cook, they asked more than they did of most men, who worked out of doors and away from the master’s eye. Female convicts in private employment could not sleep and eat under
After being rejected by Arthur, Hetty asks her uncle if she can leave the house and go into domestic service somewhere else. Martin Poyser quickly turns down her request, saying that service “wouldn’t be half so good for your health, nor for your luck i’ life….I wouldn’t have you go to service, though it was a gentleman’s house, as long as I’ve got a home for you” (Eliot 390). Although her uncle refuses her request, Hetty may have found herself working this kind of job in Australia. She had wished to escape shame by leaving the Poyser family and working somewhere else, but, in the end, the work she does becomes punishment for the shame of her crime.

One folk song that came out of this period of Australian history, called “The London Convict Maid” in a broadside, tells the story of a woman who comes from England to serve as a maid in the penal colony. Many of the stanzas accurately describe Hetty’s situation:

In innocence I once did live  
In all the joy that peace could give  
But sin my youthful heart betrayed  
And now I am a Convict Maid.  
To wed my lover I did try  
To take my master’s property  
So all my guilt was soon displayed  
And I became a Convict Maid.

These lyrics show a kind of typicality in Hetty’s story; other women faced rejection and shame, had their guilt on display, and later found themselves living as service workers in a faraway land. Although Hetty’s violent crime might have made her unique, it seems that her romantic situation was not. Jilted women were not unusual in the penal colony.

Women transported to Australia who were not assigned to a household typically worked in factories specifically for women. Many of the factories produced textiles, and the working conditions of these factories could be dreadful. Women often ended up there because they failed at their domestic jobs or became pregnant. One factory, Parramatta, eventually became an orphanage that cared for the illegitimate children of convict women (“Convicts”).

From what historians have been able to discover, life for a woman in the penal colony was difficult. As I have already noted, a female convict might face sexual and/or physical abuse and their work as prisoners was strictly regulated. While I try to place Hetty in this historical setting, cohabitating with a male convict, serving as a maid for an emigrant family, making textiles in a factory, the fact is that Eliot offers us no clues about what happened to Hetty after she left. Eliot simply writes her out of the story. All we know is that her transportation comes as the result of the pardon that Arthur secures and that she dies at some point during her exile. Because Hetty still dies at a young age, I wonder why Eliot includes her transportation at all. Why not just have Hetty die before the transportation? Why not have Hetty, her health already...
depleted from childbirth and the trial, die waiting in the prison? Knowing that death is often in store for “fallen women” in Victorian novels, why wait to kill her off? What is the point of having Hetty die “off-screen” in Australia?

Eliot may have chosen to transport Hetty to further establish *Adam Bede* as a story that takes place in the past, at a time when transportation was more common. If that is the case, we might call Hetty’s transportation a purely historical detail, there to enrich the setting of the novel more than make any political or moral statement about the policy of transportation. Perhaps Eliot wanted a different ending for Hetty than for Mary Voce, the woman on whom Eliot bases this character. Voce did not receive a pardon and was executed in 1802. Transportation for Hetty, in that case, would simply represent the alternative punishment for execution for a woman convicted of a felony at the turn of the century.

Because Eliot encouraged her sister to go to Australia, it may be tempting to think that Eliot has similar hopes for Hetty—hopes that Hetty will find some new purpose in her life in Australia—but emigration and forced exile are two very different things. Eliot, from all of her reading, knew Australia’s history as a penal colony and that it would be difficult for anyone to survive easily in the colony, let alone a frail, young woman without much experience with hard, forced labor.

Furthermore, Hetty’s transportation leads to her death. Her “alternative,” pardoned punishment, then, actually ends with the same result as a death sentence. Hetty’s transportation becomes a death sentence that no one sees. Eliot removes her from our view and from her own. Eliot, as I noted earlier, never visited Australia. According to her own aesthetic standards, she would not have been able to realistically portray Hetty’s journey after she set foot on that ship.

This again raises the question of Hetty’s transportation. Why include it if she is just going to die anyway? I think Eliot, in *Adam Bede*, wants to emphasize to her readers the absolute direness of Hetty’s situation or of any woman in Hetty’s situation. Hetty is going to lose no matter what. Yes, Arthur does what he can to redeem himself by securing a pardon for her, but Hetty is still going to die. Adam forgives Hetty and, for the most part, moves on with his life, but Hetty is still going to die. Dinah is perhaps the most successful with Hetty. The women pray together and cling to one another, but she does not change Hetty’s fate either. Dinah may have made her imprisonment more bearable, but Hetty still dies in the end.

Hetty, as the mother of an illegitimate child, is beyond saving by anyone she knows, and the establishment of penal colonies as dumping grounds for convicts gave Eliot a perfect place to dump hers. The expansive British Empire made it possible for Eliot to keep Hetty alive for a bit while still pushing her to the margins—the geographical margins of an empire where she would be completely out of sight. In other words, Eliot gives Hetty not only death but exile too, and Britain’s colonial expansion made that plot decision possible.

As I mentioned earlier, fallen women often die in Victorian fiction. Sexual transgression came with its punishments. I see Hetty’s death via transportation as particularly fitting for an act of sexual deviance. Her illicit relationship with Arthur cannot continue in Hayslope, and because of the crime she commits as a result of this relationship, she cannot be allowed back into proper, English society. As John Diekoff describes it, Hetty must “be forgotten instead of hanged, killed by a clause.
instead of a sentence” (224). She must be pushed to where other misfits go, where their deviance can occur far from view.

I am not the first person to pay critical attention to the ending of Adam Bede. Critics have debated Eliot’s “happy ending” for many years. Some readers find the ending of Adam Bede odd: Hetty’s last-minute pardon, Adam and Dinah’s sudden love for each other and marriage, Seth’s apparent acceptance of their relationship, and the reconciliation between Adam and Arthur. Things seem a little too wrapped up, and Hetty’s sad fate often gets lost in the midst of these peaceful scenes. Critics turn their attention to Adam and how he fairs in the end (this, of course, is not without good reason—the novel is named for him, after all), but Hetty’s transportation to a penal colony for a crime resulting from sex she should not have been having should stick out to readers interested in the intersections of nineteenth-century literature and the British Empire. Australia provides Eliot with a dumping place for the character that she must write out of the text. Hetty’s status as a fallen woman and her expulsion from proper English society into the margins of empire further cement the link between transgressive sex and the imperial project.

Works Cited


