Chapter Three
"The Radicalism of Virtue" in *Felix Holt*

The established critical opinion of *Felix Holt* as a novel of contradictions is reinforced in the feminist contention that although the narrative concerning Mrs. Transome features Eliot's most striking feminist heroine, the political section of the novel perpetuates patriarchal stereotypes and values. To a great extent, the perception of a dichotomy between feminism and conservatism in *Felix Holt* may be attributed to feminist misgivings about the role of feminine values in the scheme of the novel. In an attempt to disclose the underlying consistency of the novel's feminist content and to vindicate the characters and values associated with the political material, this chapter offers
a reading of *Felix Holt* based on the revaluation of feminine values.

The typical feminist critical reading of the political section of *Felix Holt* draws a parallel between the novel's views on the issue of political reforms and Eliot's own stand on feminism, on the grounds that there was a "historical connection between Reform politics and feminist ideology" (Zimmerman, 435). The sub-title of *Felix Holt* which identifies the eponymous hero as *The Radical* has led its readers to expect a fictional endorsement of the cause of political reform which was then advanced under the banner of the Radicals. Yet, although Felix does "call himself a Radical" (*Felix Holt*, 130) and supports the Radical objective of an egalitarian society which will give "'every man a man's share in what goes on in life'" (*Felix Holt*, 395), he disputes their policy of instituting reform through political measures such as "'universal suffrage, and annual parliaments, and the vote by ballot, and electoral districts'" (*Felix Holt*, 397). Contrary to his avowal of Radicalism, Felix has little faith in the good that political reforms can do, fearing instead the likelihood of abuse and exploitation:

'How can political freedom make us better, any more than a religion we don't believe in, if people laugh and wink when they see men abuse and defile it? And while public opinion
is what it is - while men have no better beliefs about public duty - while corruption is not felt to be a damming disgrace - while men are not ashamed in parliament and out of it to make public questions which concern the welfare of millions a mere screen for their own petty private ends, - I say, no fresh scheme of voting will much mend our condition.' (Felix Holt, 401)

Linda Bamber points out that Felix's objection to political reforms for neglecting to address the issue of moral corruption resembles the Conservative rather than the Radical stand on reform: "Felix ... feels that political reform is useless because it does not address itself to the moral nature of the individuals who make up the body politic. But Felix is supposed to be a Radical and this is a Conservative argument" (Bamber, 424). Eliot thus appears guilty of "'sporting with paradox'" (Felix Holt, 368) in handling the subject of political reform. As Joseph Jacobs succinctly asserts, "Felix Holt the Radical is rather Felix Holt the Conservative" (Essays, 415).

The "paradox" of Felix being a Radical in name but not in political action is construed in feminist readings as a reflection of Eliot's ambivalence towards feminism. She professed feminist sympathies but shied away from supporting feminist political action. Eliot declared to Mrs. Peter
Taylor, a feminist reformer, that she was "inclined to hope for much good from the serious representation of women's claims before Parliament", yet she insisted that her "desire to see women socially elevated" was "a broader ground of sympathy than agreement as to the amount, and kind, of result that may be hoped for from a particular measure" (Letters, IV.366). In a letter to Mrs. Nassau Senior, another feminist reformer, Eliot was more forthright about her disapproval of feminist politics: "I feel too deeply the difficult complications that beset every measure likely to affect the position of women and I also feel too imperfect a sympathy with many women who have put themselves forward in connexion with such measures, to give any practical adhesion to them" (Letters, V.58). Bonnie Zimmerman regrets that "while recognizing the legitimacy of women's rising expectations, [Eliot] could not accept the logical steps being taken to end their oppression" (Zimmerman, 449). In Felix Holt, Eliot's contradictory treatment of political reform, one of the "logical steps" by which feminists sought to improve the lot of women, thus holds negative implications for feminist readers.

It is the section of Felix Holt that is traditionally thought to be only tenuously and superficially linked to its political content that has captured the approbation of feminist readers. This is the story of Mrs. Transome, a deeply sympathetic and impassioned portrayal of the frustrated and anguished life of a woman who does not
conform to the patriarchal stereotypes of womanhood. The strong feminist overtones of Mrs. Transome's story are reinforced by the resemblance that she bears to her illustrious creator. She is considered the image of Eliot's own self who shares with her illustrious creator the strength of character that brings them into conflict with the narrow ideas that patriarchal society has of women's nature and role. Jane Miller finds it "impossible not to invoke some suggestion of identification, if only because of the sheer force of imaginative sympathy with which Mrs. Transome is understood" (Miller, 123). Notwithstanding the title, the usual indicator of a novel's narrative interest, Eliot is widely thought to have bestowed a greater share of her artistic interest and imaginative sympathy on the writing of Mrs. Transome's story than on the parts associated with Felix. This opinion is not confined to feminist hermeneutics alone. Peter Coveney states that "the presentation of Mrs. Transome is so immeasurably finer, so much more immediate than anything in the precisely political area of the novel" (Coveney, 15). F. R. Leavis is so impressed by Eliot's handling of the Transome plot that he declares: "it is in the part of *Felix Holt* dealing with Mrs. Transome that George Eliot becomes one of the great creative artists" (Leavis, 68).

Mrs. Transome's defiant assertion of her "imperious will" (*Felix Holt*, 106) establishes her as the antithesis of the ordinary, self-abnegating and submissive Victorian
heroine in spite of the fact that she is portrayed only in the traditional roles of wife and mother. In her marriage, Mrs. Transome is clearly the self-willed, dominant partner. In private, her feeble-minded husband is as helpless in her presence as "a timid animal looked at in a cage where flight is impossible" (Felix Holt, 88). In public, she assumes his patriarchal authority over the family estate. Even absolute strangers like the travellers whose coach route runs by the Transome property, learn that "she [is] master" there (Felix Holt, 81).

Mrs. Transome's defiance of patriarchal laws is widely thought to culminate in her affair with the family lawyer, Jermyn. Her adultery becomes for many feminist critics a politically charged symbol of the feminist challenge to patriarchal authority. Dorothea Barrett contends that "the sexual delinquent, she who refused to obey the dictates of patriarchy, expands to fill a larger symbolic space than her literal role in the novel would ordinarily deserve" (Barrett, 107). She counts Mrs. Transome as one of Eliot's "monumental heroines" (Barrett, 27) who "cannot be confined within the bounds of the traditional female role of faithful wife and loving mother" (Barrett, 112).

Deirdre David also considers Mrs. Transome's adultery a symbolic feminist act, pointing out the subversive consequences of her behaviour: "From a conventionally powerless position, from the emotional, domestic life to which Eliot confines her, she radically subverts the male
world of politics and the male world of patriarchal plotting. Her private, anarchic desires effectively destroy the public ambitions of her former lover and her intractable son" (David, 200). The public disclosure of Harold's illegitimate birth wrecks all his attempts to wield the patriarchal authority that he believes is his right. He is forced to abandon his political ambitions and his resolve to punish Jermyn for his rascally mismanagement of the Transome estate. Public disgrace ruins Jermyn who is wholly fixated on the patriarchal-capitalist prizes of wealth and rank, whose "life had resolved itself into the means of keeping up his head among his professional brethren and maintaining an establishment" (Felix Holt, 318). Jermyn's cherished goals of respectability and gentility destroyed, he is forced to retire "'abroad', that large home of ruined reputations" (Felix Holt, 605). In the fate that befalls Harold and Jermyn as a consequence of Mrs. Transome's adultery, David sees a symbolic threat to patriarchy as a whole. In feminist readings, the private history of Mrs. Transome has been transformed into a political statement, in accordance with the feminist call to arms, "the personal is the political".

The perceived contradiction in the implications that the different strands of narrative in Felix Holt have for feminism has tended to obscure the coherence of the novel's painstakingly juxtaposed parallels. Nevertheless, there are critical readings which attempt to vindicate Felix Holt as a harmonious whole. Perhaps the most cogent of these readings
are the moral approaches that redefine the Radicalism of the novel and its hero. Eliot is believed to have written about moral, not political, radicalism. Peter Coveney claims of *Felix Holt* that "[i]ts Radicalism is not contained within explicit, self-imprisoning, and in George Eliot's terms, self-defeating political programmes and the machinery of parliamentary measures" (Coveney, 59) but is instead to be found in "the power of moral spontaneity and of human potency" (Coveney, 55-6). While Felix "'glor[ies] in the name of Radical, or Root-and-branch man'" (*Felix Holt*, 368), he defines his own mission as a social reformer as reaching beyond the pale of politics into the nature of men: "'I want to go to some roots a good deal lower down than the franchise'" (*Felix Holt*, 368). This accords with the concern he displays for the moral rather than the political state of society, and his belief that any sort of reform must take social morality into account. In short, the Radicalism that Felix represents for Coveney and other like-minded critics is, in the words of Calvin Bedient, "indeed radical in nature: it is the radicalism of virtue" (Bedient, 76).

In practice, Felix's "radicalism of virtue" translates into a deliberate deviation from the sanctioned ambitions of capitalist society, making money and climbing up the social ladder. He chooses to "'withdraw [him]self from the push and scramble for money and position'" (*Felix Holt*, 362). He puts an end to the lucrative business that his father has left to him of making and vending folk medicines because his
medical training convinces him of their harmfulness. Instead of turning to his medical qualifications to support himself and his mother, however, he takes yet another unconventional step in choosing to become a tutor to impoverished children.

Felix's nonconformity calls into question the values underlying conventional social practices and ideas. The novel reveals, particularly through the reaction of the general public to the Reform elections, the depths of society's corruptness. Political affinities are determined by self-interest and materialism, as voters and politicians alike abuse the political system. In agreement with the opinion of Mr. Nolan the retired hosier that "'Trade makes property, my good sir, and property is Conservative'" (*Felix Holt*, 304), Mr. Wace the brewer divulges the self-serving motive behind his vote for the Conservatives: "'If a man's got a bit of property, a stake in the country, he'll want to keep things square'" (*Felix Holt*, 304). The supporters of the rival Radicals are no less selfish in their motives, as evinced in the "political 'idee'" of Chubb the publican: "The coming election was a great opportunity for applying his political 'idee', which was, that society existed for the sake of the individual, and that the name of that individual was Chubb" (*Felix Holt*, 217). The canvassing tactics of the Radical agent, Johnson, amongst working-class miners demonstrate the workings of self-interest. He bribes them with drinks to ensure their presence at the elections to intimidate the rival Conservatives. The ignorant and
drink-loving miners are easily persuaded by the appeal of free beer as one of them, Dredge, admits: "'I shouldn't know which end I stood on if it wasn't for the tickets and the treatin'" (Felix Holt, 231).

Juxtaposed against the self-centredness and materialism of capitalist society, Felix's refusal to conform becomes a symbolic resistance to moral corruption. As he puts it, "'I'm determined never to go about making my face simpering or solemn, and telling professional lies for profit; or to get tangled in affairs where I must wink at dishonesty and pocket the proceeds, and justify that knavery as part of a system that I can't alter'" (Felix Holt, 363). Peter Coveney comments: "it is part of [Felix's] radicalism not to be touched by aristocratic and bourgeois society" (Coveney, 15). Florence Sandler elaborates: "Felix's decision in favour of moral integrity makes him ... not a radical at all in the political sense. He is ... more 'radical' than that. What he has come up with is a radical critique of the political and economic process" (Sandler, 143-4).

By considering the novel and its hero radical in terms of their morality and not their politics, Coveney and Sandler are able to propose a complementary role for the narrative featuring Mrs. Transome. Coveney comments: "In the general moral texture of the novel, Transome Court becomes the other, the negative case" (Coveney, 17). Unlike Felix, the principal characters associated with Transome Court are complacent adherents to the corrupt values of
their society as Harold Transome's political thinking reveals. Shrewd enough to realize that the "'Tory oaks are rotting'" while "'Radical sticks are growing'" (Felix Holt, 96), he believes that he has a better chance of getting into parliament on a Radical ticket. Harold "dislike[s] impracticable notions of loftiness and purity" (Felix Holt, 275) and considers his self-seeking merely the necessary actions of a "practical man" (Felix Holt, 278). Far from wanting to empower the lower classes as genuine Radicals do, his aim is to "take the inevitable process of changing everything out of the hands of beggarly demagogues and purse-proud tradesmen" (Felix Holt, 110). Harold, culpable in conforming to the self-interest and greed that rules his society, not surprisingly exudes an "air of moral mediocrity" (Felix Holt, 524).

Readings of Mrs. Transome's story as "the negative case" (Coveney, 17) inevitably offer a less triumphant view of her than that which emerges from feminist readings. The symbolic feminist importance of Mrs. Transome's adultery is overlooked in moral interpretations of Felix Holt which instead consider her sexual rebellion and its consequences as the cautionary tale of a tormented being in moral stasis. Andrew Thompson claims that "her refusal to acknowledge her own transgression, or to see the bearing of moral law upon her own circumstances precludes all possibility of moral growth" (Thompson, 556). Peter Coveney contends that it is "important indeed to take the point from the outset that
Mrs. Transome is to be read as a life evacuated of meaning" (Coveney, 40).

Moral interpretations of *Felix Holt* as a novel "contained within a single, unifying moral vision" (Coveney, 10), may have reconciled the contradictions discovered in the novel by other critical approaches. To the feminist critic, however, these readings are unsatisfactory because they either exclude or oppose feminist opinions. However, critics of *Felix Holt* appear to have overlooked the parallels between the novel's moral vision and Eliot's feminist ideology. In the following discussion of the novel, I will attempt to substantiate my interpretation of the "moral vision" of *Felix Holt* as an illustration of Eliot's feminist ideology.

As I have sought to establish in Chapter One, Eliot's feminist sympathies lean towards the radical. She distanced herself from liberal feminist attempts to make the oppressive structures of patriarchal society more equitable because she was totally opposed to the values of self-aggrandizement, alienation, and aggression that shaped those structures. In their place, she envisioned a life of interdependence founded upon the traditional feminine virtues of sympathy, lovingness, and consideration for others. Eliot transformed these feminine values, disparaged and shunned by many feminist thinkers as patriarchal stereotypes of womanliness, into a feminist public and personal morality that stands in opposition to the
destructiveness and corruption of patriarchal values.

_Felix Holt_ hints at the indivisible equation of capitalist and patriarchal power. The corrupt values of capitalism are traced to their roots in patriarchal ideology. Mr. Wace's materialism and self-serving political allegiance are the off-shoots of his determination to leave a handsome patrimony for his sons: "'I'd make a good fight myself before I'd leave a worse world for my boys than I've found for myself'" (_Felix Holt_, 301; my italics). The outrage that greets Harold Transome's decision to run for Parliament as a Radical candidate stems from the close identification of class and political interests with patriarchal power. Sir Maximus Debarry's initial enthusiasm about Harold's return from the Middle East spells out clearly the patriarchal nature of the family and political roles that he is expected to fill: "'This young fellow [has come] back with a fortune to give the family a head and a position'" (_Felix Holt_, 180). In the Tory newspaper, _The North Loamshire Herald_, Harold is vilified as "an example of defection in the inheritor of a family name which in times past had been associated with attachment to right principle, and with the maintenance of our constitution in Church and state" (_Felix Holt_, 195). This reveals the entwined class, political, and even religious interests that feed patriarchal power. The cynical allusion to religion in the speech made by the Radical demagogue in Duffield confirms its function as a tool of patriarchal-capitalist forces to
oppress and subdue the working classes: "'They'll give us plenty of heaven ... That's the sort of religion they like - a religion that gives us working men heaven, and nothing else'" (Felix Holt, 397).

Felix's rebellion against the values and practices of his society can therefore be construed as a rebellion against patriarchal power. All the more so because the reasons he gives for his refusal to conform reflects Eliot's feminist ideals. He rejects his birthright as a patriarch in his society because it will mean acquiring the hollow values of materialism and self-aggrandizement: "'If I once went into that sort of struggle for success, I should want to win ... I should do this as men are doing it every day, for a ridiculously small prize - perhaps for none at all - perhaps for the sake of two parlours, a rank eligible for the church-wardenship, a discontented wife and several unhopeful children'" (Felix Holt, 363). The life of a propertied patriarch holds no attraction for Felix beside the "'other thing that's got into [his] mind like a splinter ... the life of the miserable - the spawning life of vice and hunger'" (Felix Holt, 363). His sympathy for the suffering inspires him to devote his life to compassion and caring. He aspires to be "'one who could be glad to have lived because the world was chiefly miserable, and his life had come to help some one who needed it'" (Felix Holt, 361). His ideal, a life of "'going shares with the unlucky'" (Felix Holt, 362), is synonymous with the feminine ideal of
interdependence.

Felix likens his purpose in life to a priestly vocation but the tropes he employs also draw a parallel between the life he elects to lead and the traditional feminine experience of domesticity:

'Thousands of men have wedded poverty because they expected to go to heaven for it; I don't expect to go to heaven for it, but I wed it because it enables me to do what I most want to do on earth ... I will try to make life less bitter for the few within my reach. It is held reasonable enough to toil for the fortunes of a family, though it may turn to imbecility in the third generation. I choose a family with more chances in it.' *(Felix Holt, 367)*

Felix chooses to "wed" poverty in order to help his "family" of "the few within his reach". He has cast himself in the traditional female roles of wife and mother in defining his life's work. In so doing, he challenges the patriarchal doctrine of the separate spheres that serves to differentiate social functions and values according to gender and to limit to the narrow circle of the family the functions and values assigned to women.

However, some critics are of the opinion that Eliot
reinforced this traditional separation of the public and domestic spheres in *Felix Holt* with its concomitant reactionary implications for feminism. As Bonnie Zimmerman declares, "[a]lthough Chartist women debated female suffrage, although powerful hostesses influenced political ministers, although *Felix Holt* was itself written during a period of feminist activity, George Eliot firmly draws a curtain between the male sphere of activity and the female sphere of passivity" (Zimmerman, 446-7). But the role that Eliot envisions for Felix brings the feminine values of the 'passive' domestic sphere into the 'active' public sphere of social relations, breaking down the barrier that patriarchy has erected between the two.

To digress a little, even Felix's comparison of his life's work to priesthood holds revolutionary significance. It reflects his affinity for the Catholic faith: "'The old Catholics are right, with their higher rule and their lower. Some are called to subject themselves to a harder discipline, and renounce things voluntarily which are lawful for others'" (*Felix Holt*, 363). In a society where both the state religion, Anglicanism, and the Dissenting doctrine are firmly intertwined with class, political, and economic interests, Felix's identification with Catholicism is in keeping with his departure from the values of his capitalist-patriarchal society. Furthermore, the Catholic faith appears to have possessed feminist significance for Eliot in spite of the sexist power structure of the Church
that refuses to admit women into priesthood. Undoubtedly, Catholicism underlies the "coherent social faith and order" that Eliot considers to be the inspiration for the "far-resonant" (*Middlemarch*, 25) achievements of Saint Theresa of Avila, her model of feminist heroism alluded to in the Prelude of *Middlemarch*. In *Felix Holt*, the hero's Catholic sympathies form a symbolic link between him and the other unconventional, large-minded, large-souled natures. Philip DeBarry, the kindly, conscientious heir of Sir Maximus, is another young man who renounces his patriarchal inheritance. He becomes "a convert to Catholicism" (*Felix Holt*, 249). The loving and selfless nature of Mr. Lyon, the Independent Minister and Esther's adoptive father, finds its truest test in his marriage to her mother, the French Catholic Annette.

Felix sees in feminine values the ideal solution to redress social imperfections in the public sphere. He aims to help the impoverished mining community at Sproxton by setting up a school for the children which would be paid for by the miners themselves. His plan is to "'lay hold of them by their fatherhood'" (*Felix Holt*, 219), to appeal to their love for their children and their sense of responsibility as fathers to curb their excessive indulgence in drink so that they can save some money for the school. His endeavour to instill in the miners the feminine values of caring and renunciation is compared favourably with the self-serving intervention of politicians like Mr. Garstin, the mine owner and Whig candidate, who would finance the school only to
bolster his popularity for the elections: "if he could move these men to save something from their drink and pay a schoolmaster for their boys, a greater service would be done them than if Mr. Garstine and his company were persuaded to establish a school" (Felix Holt, 219).

Felix Holt thus accords social primacy to human ties and emotions, traditionally considered domestic feminine concerns, to counter the alienating, materialistic values of patriarchal society. The self-serving machinations of patriarchal society in which human emotions are entirely discounted are aptly compared to a chess game played with human pieces:

Fancy what a game at chess would be if all the chessmen had passions and intellects, more or less small and cunning: if you were not only uncertain about your adversary's men, but a little uncertain also about your own; if your knight could shuffle himself on to a new square by the sly; if your bishop, in disgust at your castling, could wheedle your pawns out of their places; and if your pawns, hating you because they are pawns, could make away from their appointed posts that you might get checkmate on a sudden. You might be the longest-headed of deductive reasoners, and yet you might be beaten by
your own pawns. You would be especially likely to be beaten, if you depended arrogantly on your mathematical imagination, and regarded your passionate pieces with contempt.

Yet this imaginary chess is easy compared with the game a man has to play against his fellow-men with other fellow-men for his instruments. He thinks himself sagacious, perhaps, because he trusts no bond except that of self-interest; but the only self-interest he can safely rely on is what seems to be such to the mind he would use or govern. Can he ever be sure of knowing this?

(Felix Holt, 383)

The plotting and deception required in a game of chess make it an apposite analogy for the political, economic, and legal manipulations driven by patriarchal self-aggrandizement and materialism. The element of exploitation is strongly present in the game of chess and the patriarchal game of life. Both make use of "pawns" to outwit opponents and to gain the upper hand. Eliot's ironic juxtaposition of "fellow-men" with "instruments" stresses the blatantly exploitative nature of patriarchal dealings. Obsessed with the self, trusting "no bond except that of self-interest", patriarchal figures fail to recognize and respect the shared
humanity of "fellow-men", in particular, our feminine capacity for feeling, for being "passionate". The callous self-centredness and suspiciousness of patriarchal figures breed alienation, aggression, and ultimately, self-destruction. The importance of human ties and emotions is dismissed to the detriment of the individual and society. As Felix points out in defending his objection to political reform, "'all the schemes about voting, and districts, and annual parliaments, and the rest, are engines, and the water or steam - the force that is to work them - must come out of human nature - out of men's passions, feelings, desires. Whether these engines will do good work or bad depends on these feelings'" (Felix Holt, 400). Felix's espousal of feminine values and concerns in opposition to the dominant values of society makes his role in the novel a radical one - in the feminist sense of the word.

To contend that Felix is a feminist hero, however, is to fly in the face of the almost unanimous opinion of feminist critics that he is an overbearing misogynist. Shirley Foster's view of Felix as "highly patronizing about women" (Foster, 215) and Jennifer Uglow's remark that he is guilty of an "assumption of superiority ... in his attitude towards women" (Uglow, 185) are representative of feminist antipathy. The objections against Felix revolve around his role as self-appointed mentor to Esther Lyon, owing to the feminine qualities that his influence brings out in her. He is criticized for reducing her to the patriarchal stereotype
of womanliness and for imposing on her the patriarchal norm of female submission to male authority. Bonnie Zimmerman claims that Eliot employs "the language of suppression" (Zimmerman, 448) to depict the transformation that Felix works in Esther. In the description of Esther as having "a softened expression to her eyes, a more feminine beseechingness and self-doubt to her manners" (Felix Holt, 338), Zimmerman finds the ominous reactionary suggestion that "powerlessness and subjection, when accompanied by love, can be woman's proper sphere" (Zimmerman, 448). Foster sums up the reason for feminist disapproval of Felix and of his influence on Esther in her observation that "Esther's transformation relies wholly on stereotypical notions of female virtue" (Foster, 215).

The objections to Felix naturally affect feminist opinion of Esther. Eliot's characterization of Esther has been branded an artistic and ideological retrogression, a lamentable reversion to the patriarchal prescriptions of ideal womanhood in contrast to Mrs. Transome's splendid feminist proportions. The emotional and psychological complexity vivifying the portrayal of Mrs. Transome is found comparatively lacking in Esther; a shortcoming attributed to a personal and artistic detachment on Eliot's part. Shirley Foster claims: "In contrast to Mrs. Transome, whose tragic dilemma is far more fascinating to Eliot, [Esther] represents the limpness of idealism divorced from any real engagement with character" (Foster, 215). Dorothea
Barrett postulates that the language of the novel reveals the relative importance of the two women in Eliot's eyes: "the monumental metaphors normally kept for the heroines of the novels are here reserved for Mrs. Transome, and Esther is described in the diminishing conventional feminine terms usually reserved for the counterpoint characters" (Barrett, 112).

Nevertheless, the characterization of Esther and Mrs. Transome allows for a greater degree of complexity and realism in depicting the importance of feminine values within the patriarchal matrix. Esther and Mrs. Transome are social beings who cannot escape being caught up in the values of their patriarchal society. Thus, their personal histories reflect the social effects of the values they espouse. In this respect, the delineation of the heroines of Felix Holt is more sophisticated than that of Romola whose portrayal verges on essentialism. Romola's values are inherently feminine and remain untainted in spite of the patriarchal environment of her upbringing.

In the light of the feminist significance that feminine values are endowed with in Eliot's fiction, the misogyny and patriarchal oppression that Felix has been accused of belie the revolutionary, liberating consequences of the transformation that he inspires in Esther. The changed Esther plays as significant a role as Mrs. Transome in developing the feminist meaning of Felix Holt. The feminist ramifications of feminine virtues and the reprehensibility
and dangers of the values that rule the patriarchal sphere are explored in the carefully drawn parallels between the lives of the two women, particularly their romantic histories.

The self-will and adultery for which Mrs. Transome is celebrated in most feminist readings are neither indisputably nor unequivocally revolutionary. Mrs. Transome's feminism is expressed in her scorn for the patriarchal stereotypes of womanliness and her appropriation of the patriarchal-capitalist values that society reserves for men and the masculine public sphere. Seen from the radical perspective, however, her unquestioning preference for masculine values is ironically a form of conformity.

When she was young she had been thought wonderfully clever and accomplished, and had been rather ambitious of intellectual superiority - had secretly picked out for private reading the lighter parts of dangerous French authors ... She always thought that the dangerous French writers were wicked, and that her reading of them was a sin; but many sinful things were highly agreeable to her, and many things which she did not doubt to be good and true were dull and meaningless. She found ridicule of Biblical characters very amusing, and she was
interested in stories of illicit passion: but she believed all the while that truth and safety lay in due attendance on prayers and sermons, in the admirable doctrines and ritual of the Church of England, equally remote from Puritanism and Popery; in fact, in such a view of this world and the next as would preserve the existing arrangements of English society quite unshaken, keeping down the obtrusiveness of the vulgar and the discontent of the poor. *(Felix Holt, 105)*

The above passage reveals that the unconventional pleasure that Mrs. Transome takes in "many sinful things" is a superficial impulse primarily spent in trifling naughtiness such as reading the "lighter parts" of books thought unsuitable for young women, presumably the "stories of illicit passion", and satirizing "Biblical characters". The core of her values remains unchallenged, as indicated by her views on religion and society. Her faith is the Anglicanism typical of her class which, echoing the self-seeking of the patriarchs, she upholds as the means of preserving class privileges.

Even Mrs. Transome's adultery, her most audacious act of defiance, her actual indulgence in "illicit passion" *(Felix Holt, 105)*, is paradoxically rooted in her conformity. Jermyn who "had at one time kneeled to her and
kissed [her] hands fervently" (Felix Holt, 515) struck a responsive chord in her soul that "had vibrated" with "the maiden need to have her hand kissed and be the object of chivalry" (Felix Holt, 201). Mrs. Transome had longed to be idealized and idolized like the perfect, unattainable heroines of courtly love literature and Jermyn's worshipful love had seemed to her the fulfilment of this yearning. She imagined that his love was capable of lifting her out of mundane reality and into the intense, exalted life evoked in literature: "she had thought there was a poetry in such passion beyond any to be found in everyday domesticity" (Felix Holt, 515).

Mrs. Transome's longing for worshipful love reflects her confidence in her own superiority, measured against the patriarchal concept of lineage that is her only touchstone in life as she has "no ultimate analysis of things that went beyond blood and family" (Felix Holt, 494). Towards those whom she considers her inferiors, her sense of her own superiority is translated into patriarchal domination. As the de facto ruler of the Transome estate, she has a feudal relish for the deference shown by the tenants: "She liked that a tenant should stand bareheaded below her as she sat on horseback ... She liked to be curtsied and bowed to by all the congregation as she walked up the little barn of a church" (Felix Holt, 106).

Thus, while Mrs. Transome's adultery may be considered an assertion of her own will in defiance of patriarchal
laws, that very belief in the superiority of her will is ironically embedded in patriarchal values. As K. M. Newton observes: "Mrs. Transome's belief in the superiority of her will is not freely chosen on her part but in large measure socially determined ... her belief in her own superiority has its roots in her upbringing as part of the upper class" (Newton, 42). The essentially conformist nature of Mrs. Transome's involvement with Jermyn is revealed through its repercussions for herself. Far from being liberated by her sexual rebellion, her everyday experience is no different from the conventional lot of women in patriarchy; she too finds herself suffering under male exploitation.

Jermyn had captivated Mrs. Transome with the impression he gave of abasing himself in worship of her. In truth, however, his chivalrous passion was no more than a variation on the theme of his patriarchal self-centredness, "a selfishness which then took the form of homage to her" (Felix Holt, 515). When the opportunity to make a socially advantageous marriage presented itself, he did not hesitate to break off their relationship. Nor did he have any qualms about taking advantage of their past affair to bleed the Transome estate in his dealings as the family lawyer: "those relations which had sealed her lips on Jermyn's conduct in business matters, had been with him a ground for presuming that he should have impunity in any lax dealing into which circumstances had led him" (Felix Holt, 202). Not content with having profited from his embezzlement, Jermyn is yet
shameless and selfish enough to demand that Mrs. Transome
should save him from being ruined by the legal action that
Harold has taken against him. Jermyn wants Mrs. Transome to
stop Harold from proceeding with the suit by revealing to
him the truth about his paternity. Jermyn is quite unmoved
by the likelihood that such a disclosure would break "'the
last poor threads between her and her son'" (Felix Holt,
519). Stung by her refusal which he has the gall to consider
unreasonable and by the prospect of imminent ruin, he casts
off all pretensions to chivalry to 'kiss and tell',
declaring his fatherhood to Harold in public.

Thus, as Simon Gaunt points out, it is erroneous to
think of the chivalry celebrated in literature as an
empowerment of women: "One of the most insidious patriarchal
myths of European literary history and criticism is that the
phenomenon that became known as 'courtly love' glorifies, if
not to say deifies women, that this is a sign of advance and
progress for women, and that women should be grateful for
thus becoming the object of male veneration" (Gaunt, 310).
The code of chivalry only appears to liberate women from
patriarchal oppression by inverting the pattern of male
dominance and female subjugation. Jermyn's chivalry led Mrs.
Transome to think that she had "power over him to make him
do what she liked" but such a belief was only a "fallacious
delight" (Felix Holt, 538). In truth, a woman on a pedestal
is a woman possessed and forced into passivity and silence.

Nevertheless, even after Mrs. Transome realized that
Jermyn's "'tenderness had turned into calculation'" (Felix Holt, 518), she was incapable of confronting him to put an end to his vile exploitation of her and the estate. She "was inclined to lash him with indignation, to scorch him with the words that were just the fit names for his doings" (Felix Holt, 202) but she was paralyzed by her patriarchal love of supremacy. She could not bring herself to swallow the humiliating knowledge that she must blame herself too for her plight: "But no sooner did the words 'You have brought it on me' rise within her than she heard within also the retort, 'You have brought it on yourself.' Not for all the world beside could she bear to hear that retort uttered from without" (Felix Holt, 202-3).

In order to preserve the illusion of her own superiority and the sanctity of her romantic dreams, Mrs. Transome suffers Jermyn's exploitation in silence: "'I might almost have let myself starve, rather than have scenes of quarrel with the man I had loved, in which I must accuse him of turning my love into a good bargain'" (Felix Holt, 518). The agony of her suppressed anger and dread is captured in the metaphorical description of her self-enforced silence as an invisible net of "the finest threads, such as no eye sees" which "bound cunningly about the sensitive flesh so that movement to break them would bring torture" (Felix Holt, 198). Mrs. Transome's unquestioning compliance with patriarchal values, her patriarchal love of domination, her yearning to be the "object of chivalry" (Felix Holt, 201),
and her subsequent entrapment affirm Laurie Langbauer's observation that "Eliot's fiction suggests that women are also part of the power system that constrains them" (Langbauer, 228).

Ominous echoes of Jermyn's chivalry reverberates through Harold's courtship of Esther. He flatters her with his ostensibly self-forgetful alacrity to serve her, even to the extent of kneeling to hold her netting-stirrup for her to put her foot through. Nevertheless, the adage of 'like father, like son' holds true as Harold too wears his chivalry as a velvet glove to conceal the iron hand of domineering, selfish manipulation. He "had a way of virtually measuring the value of everything by the contribution it made to his own pleasure. His very good-nature was unsympathetic: It never came from any thorough understanding or deep respect for what was in the mind of the person he obliged or indulged" (Felix Holt, 528). As a son, he is no more considerate of Mrs. Transome than his natural father was despite being gallant and magnanimous. He "kissed her brow, offered her his arm, let her choose what she liked for the house and garden, asked her whether she would have bays or greys for her new carriage, and was bent on seeing her make as good a figure in the neighbourhood as any other woman of her rank" (Felix Holt, 198). However, he surrounds his mother with luxuries only to provide the appropriate setting for the decorative role of "a grandmamma on satin cushions" (Felix Holt, 95) that he expects her to
play in his household. The wholehearted filial concern and interest that would have taught Harold his mother's true feelings, that "life would have little meaning for her if she were to be gently thrust aside as a harmless elderly woman" (*Felix Holt*, 91), are wanting in him. As a lover, Harold is motivated by equally self-serving and unsentimental motives. The conquest of Esther is the most convenient and satisfying means of nullifying the threat that her legal claims pose to his position as master of the Transome estate.

Initially, Esther resembled Mrs. Transome in her unquestioning acceptance of the conventional values of her society. Florence Sandler observes that "her initial values and self-image [are] very much like those of the young Mrs. Transome" (Sandler, 150). Esther mirrored Mrs. Transome in her self-delusion; she too believed that she had transcended all that was mundane and conventional, yet all the while she clung firmly to the patriarchal system of values. She was convinced, as was Mrs. Transome, that noble birth was an irrefutable mark of superiority. She judged her own person and others according to the materialistic notions of superiority in her class-conscious, capitalist-patriarchal society: "she was alive to the finest shades of manner, to the nicest distinctions of tone and accent; she had a little code of her own about scents and colours, textures and behaviour, by which she secretly condemned or sanctioned all things and persons" (*Felix Holt*, 159). Initially unaware of
her true aristocratic parentage, she prided herself instead on her slavish affectation of stereotypical upper-class refinement: "she was well satisfied with herself for her fastidious taste, never doubting that hers was the highest standard. She was proud that the best-born and handsomest girls at school had always said that she might be taken for a born lady" (Felix Holt, 159). Lynda Mugglestone remarks: "Endowing the superficial with significance is in many ways the hallmark of Esther's character before the onset of her moral education; dress, manners, and ... notions of linguistic correctness become determiners of acceptability within her narrow vision" (Mugglestone, 18). Esther's exaltation of the nobility and her confidence in her own superiority were fused in romantic daydreams which echoed Mrs. Transome's yearning to be "the object of chivalry" (Felix Holt, 201). Esther too dreamed of herself as the cynosure of "adoring respect" with "several accomplished cavaliers all at once suing for her hand" (Felix Holt, 473). Her initial conventionality raised the possibility that she would be caught, like Mrs. Transome, in the patriarchal trap of chivalry.

Nevertheless, Esther's story diverges from Mrs. Transome's at the point when her values undergo a transformation. The self-conceit and love of luxury that render her susceptible to Harold's amorous attentions are shaken by a growing consciousness of the narrowness and reprehensibility of the underlying values. Esther "felt
herself seriously shaken in her self-contentment ... She felt as if she should for evermore be haunted by self-criticism, and never do anything to satisfy those fancies on which she had simply piqued herself before without being dogged by inward questions" *(Felix Holt*, 214). Whereas Mrs. Transome considers Jermyn's homage her rightful due because she has "never seen behind the canvas with which her life was hung" *(Felix Holt*, 494), Esther is led by her self-doubt to look behind Harold's chivalry and the luxurious trappings of Transome Court to see the repressive repercussions of succumbing: "With a terrible prescience which a multitude of impressions during her stay at Transome Court had contributed to form, she saw herself in a silken bondage that arrested all motive, and was nothing better than a well-cushioned despair" *(Felix Holt*, 592). The "silken bondage" that Esther foresees as her existence if she were to accept Harold's proposal are the same "fatal threads" *(Felix Holt*, 198) of patriarchal oppression that bind Mrs. Transome in her relationship with Jermyn.

Contrary to the objections to self-doubt in general as a patriarchal stereotype of womanliness that obstructs female self-development and, in Esther's case, as a symptom of Felix's repressive influence, self-doubt is presented as an empowering feminist trait. It is the key to Esther's liberation from patriarchal control and which unlocks the feminist significance of Felix's relationship with her. Although Felix's censoriousness is viewed as little better
than Harold's chivalry, merely a more open assertion of male superiority and a more direct imposition of male will, it is the antithesis of Harold's flattery. Felix "had no chivalry in him" (Felix Holt, 264). In a Brontesque equation of blunt honesty with true regard, Eliot portrays Felix's criticism as paradoxically the genuine compliment to Esther, prompted by the conviction that she is capable of espousing worthier values: "'If a woman really believes herself to be a lower kind of being, she should place herself in subjection: she should be ruled by the thoughts of her father or husband. If not, let her show her power of choosing something better'" (Felix Holt, 210). Implicit in these words of encouragement is a recognition of a woman's equal worth and of her right to make a life for herself beyond the patriarchal matrix. In total contrast is the opinion of Harold who, disparaging all women as "slight things" (Felix Holt, 266), pronounces: "'Women, very properly, don't change their views, but keep to the notions in which they have been brought up. It doesn't signify what they think - they are not called upon to judge or to act'" (Felix Holt, 116-7).

A seemingly inconsequential incident during a walk in the countryside encapsulates the feminist significance of Felix's unchivalric behaviour towards Esther. When they are confronted with a "difficult stile" (Felix Holt, 361) he does not impose his assistance upon her as chivalry dictates he should do. On the surface, such assistance is gratifying but lurking beneath would be the sexist presumption that she
is dependent upon him. Instead he offers her a choice that gives her the opportunity to assert herself: "'Shall I help you, or will you be left to yourself?'" (Felix Holt, 361). The minor act of decision-making that Felix urges Esther to in this instance is symbolic of the larger, self-affirming choices that his influence later leads her to make.

The pivotal decision in Felix Holt rests on Esther's shoulders. She must make the ideologically significant choice whether or not to accept Harold's proposal and her Transome inheritance. Transome Court, the legacy of Esther's father, is a synecdoche for patriarchy in Felix Holt. It comes down to her tainted by the self-seeking and treachery of the patriarchal realm. If it were not for the greed of the Transome ancestor who betrayed his descendants by selling his birthright or the double-dealing of Christian and Johnson, Jermy's pawns in his contest of will with Harold, Esther would not have had any claim to the estate nor would she have learnt of her inheritance. Thus, her refusal of Harold and the Transome estate is weighted with feminist significance. Her decision represents a rejection of patriarchal control, a refutation of patriarchal belittlement such as is encapsulated in Harold's disparagement of women's views and actions, and of the patriarchal values that feed such overweening dominance and arrogance.

Esther's self-questioning also fosters a growing appreciation of feminine values and the feminine life of
interdependence that is apparent in her change of heart towards her adoptive father, Mr. Lyon. Previously, his unassuming goodness was obscured for her by the disdain and shame she felt at his unworldly absent-mindedness about manners and attire. As she begins to shed her self-conceit and her materialistic notions of what constitutes good and bad, Esther is increasingly able to esteem and reciprocate his loving concern for her. In Mr. Lyon's eyes, Esther's changed heart makes her "'the image of [her] mother!'" (Felix Holt, 245). Upon learning the long-kept secret of the circumstances surrounding Annette's marriage to Mr. Lyon, Esther too sees in her transformed self a reflection of her mother. Gratitude for Mr. Lyon's selfless love and pity for his helplessness in ill-health had prompted Annette to marry him in spite of poverty and the differences in their social standing and religion. Esther takes her mother's story as an example to her to value the feminine life of sympathy above the patriarchal considerations of wealth and rank. She is moved to affirm her regard for the life where "'one bears and does everything because of some great and strong feeling - so that this and that in one's circumstances don't signify'" (Felix Holt, 356), declaring it to be "'the best life'" (Felix Holt, 355). Esther's decision to reject her Transome inheritance for the life of interdependence is thus symbolically her choice of her mother's legacy over her father's.

It is possible to find in the comparison of the mother
and the daughter in *Felix Holt* a refutation of the protest that Esther's feminine values merely turn her into a patriarchal stereotype. Annette's requital of Lyon's love, although inspirational to Esther, is a single act of sympathy that has no lasting or profound impact upon her nature which remains conventionally passive and unreflecting. In contrast, the transformation in Esther's values is an "inward revolution" (*Felix Holt*, 591) that is baptismal in its effects: "the beginning of compunction is the beginning of a new life" (*Felix Holt*, 246). Her feminine values and qualities are an active force, capable of overcoming the patriarchal barriers of self-complacency and self-interest not only in herself but also in others. Her feminine influence "breaks through formulas too rigorously urged on men by daily practical needs" (*Felix Holt*, 571), challenging and reshaping the patriarchal values and practices of her society.

Esther reacts with sympathy and tenderness where patriarchal society imposes alienating condemnation or indifference. Like the other ladies of Mrs. Transome's acquaintance, Esther has some inkling of Mrs. Transome's adulterous past but unlike them, she does not indulge in malicious gossip nor does she self-righteously snub the older woman. Esther's suspicions only heighten her consciousness of and her sympathy for Mrs. Transome's suffering. Esther has "no impulse to punish and to strike her whom fate had stricken" (*Felix Holt*, 596), only a
sympathetic desire to "soothe her with a daughter's tendance" (*Felix Holt*, 598). Like Romola who cares for Tessa in spite of the latter's adulterous relationship with Tito, Esther is guided by her feminine values to a more just, more compassionate, feminist understanding of Mrs. Transome as a victim of patriarchal values and exploitation.

Even in the deepest depths of her agony, Mrs. Transome's deeply ingrained self-importance prevents her from climbing down from her illusory pedestal to ask for solace. Esther's sympathy, however, saves Mrs. Transome from her self-destructive pride. Because she is sensitive to the needs of other people and ready to respond with tenderness, Esther is able to set Mrs. Transome free from her purgatory:

The proud woman yearned for the caressing pity that must dwell in that young bosom. She opened her door gently, but when she had reached Esther's she hesitated. She had never yet in her life asked for compassion - had never thrown herself in faith on an unproffered love. And she might have gone on pacing the corridor like an uneasy spirit without a goal, if Esther's thought, leaping towards her, had not saved her from the need to ask admission. (*Felix Holt*, 596)

Without the influence of Esther's sympathy, "'the last
poor threads" (Felix Holt, 519) between mother and son, broken by the selfish force of Jermyn's disclosure of Harold's illegitimacy, would scarcely have been mended. Harold is contemptuous of his mother, blaming her for his exclusion from the place that was his, as master of Transome Court, in the power structures of patrilineal rank and patrimonial wealth. Neither awareness of the fact that he is not the only victim of the adultery nor concern for his anguish mother enters his mind until Esther's example of "a daughter's tendance" (Felix Holt, 598) and her tactful counsel inspire in him filial forgiveness and kindness.

Esther's testimony during Felix's trial for manslaughter contains no facts capable of cancelling out the circumstantial evidence against him. In fact, her statement amounts to nothing more than a proclamation of her admiration and faith in him, which Arnold Kettle terms rather wryly a "high-grade character-reference" (Kettle, 108). However, the "ardour" (Felix Holt, 571) that resonates through Esther's words circumvents the rigidity of the patriarchal legal system. Her feminine strength of feeling, entirely uncalculated, spontaneous, disregardful of "all personal considerations" (Felix Holt, 572), moves her ordinarily unforgiving, divided society to organize an appeal for Felix's pardon. Having rescued Felix with the power of the feminine qualities that he had awakened in her, Esther's subsequent acceptance of his proposal is the seal set on her commitment to the feminine life of
interdependence.

Her radical decision to "be the wife of a man who said he would always be poor" (Felix Holt, 604) produces the same effect upon her society as Felix's influence upon her; it opens up in conventional minds the prospect of a more meaningful life beyond that dictated by patriarchal values: "no wedding, even the gayest, ever raised so much interest and debate in Treby Magna ... the majority of honest Trebians were affected somewhat in the same way as happy-looking Mr. Wace was, who observed to his wife ... 'I feel somehow as if I believed more in everything that's good'" (Felix Holt, 604). Andrew Thompson suggests that in Esther's acceptance of Felix, Eliot is "recasting her own experience" (Thompson, 561) of rebelling against social conventions in living with G. H. Lewes: "Esther experiences many of the same emotional crises and problems as her author, choosing as she does to disappoint expectation and flout convention by rejecting social advantage in marriage for a socially far less acceptable alternative, Felix" (Thompson, 560). Thompson further claims that their defiance brought them fulfilment: "Marian Evans-Lewes had the same conviction about her own life as her narrator in Felix Holt had about Esther's: "I will only say that Esther has never repented"" (Thompson, 606).

Nevertheless, a number of critics find little that is revolutionary or satisfying about Esther's decision to reject her Transome inheritance in favour of the feminine
life of sympathy. Rather, they consider her freedom to choose her own life undermined by her inability to separate the question of her future from the issue of marriage. Esther believes that her "lot is made for her by the love she accepts" (Felix Holt, 525). Sally Shuttleworth is of the opinion that "Esther's vision of woman's necessary passivity is false. She need not marry Harold, and in fact actively rejects him, and the wealth he represents, to marry Felix" (Shuttleworth, 136). Shuttleworth is not particularly impressed with the decisions that Esther is able to make. To Shuttleworth, Esther's ability to actively choose a life for herself is unfortunately limited to "only the power of choice between two men. She is free neither to ask for love nor to order her life apart from the love that is brought her" (Shuttleworth, 136). Pauline Nestor reiterates that "while Esther's power to reject Harold is in one sense absolute, Esther is nevertheless dependent on men to offer her scope for the worthy channelling of affections and energy ... Thus, Esther's power to refuse ... is essentially a secondary power to react, not to initiate" (Nestor, 191). In the words of Christine Sutphin, "Esther must choose the best vicarious existence" (Sutphin, 348).

Jennifer Uglow regrets that Eliot's delineation of Esther's femininity reflects the patriarchal view of woman as "a relative sex whose lot is made by the love they choose" (Uglow, 190). Uglow cites the description of Esther's feminine impulse to speak in Felix's defence as an
example of how Eliot's treatment of femininity in *Felix Holt* is "'radical' in the sense of claiming a vital role for an innate femininity, but it is alarmingly conservative (and regressive in the body of Eliot's work) in associating this influence solely with marriage and domesticity" (Uglov, 190).

That Eliot does not confine the importance of the feminine influence to the domestic sphere in *Felix Holt* but has carefully employed the multiple plots to convey the public significance of these values is one of the points that my reading of *Felix Holt* has attempted to establish. Esther's active role in making the feminine influence felt in public and private circles is another. Her view of marriage as a necessary and indeed, the primary determinant of her future may bear negative implications for feminist readers who uphold independence and self-determination as feminist ideals. Seen in the light of Eliot's ideal of interdependence, however, Esther's desire to be married is but the very natural emotional need of a very human person. She is, we are told, "intensely of the feminine type, verging neither towards the saint nor the angel ... 'a fair divided excellence, whose fulness of perfection' must be in marriage" (*Felix Holt*, 551).

Further, Eliot has taken pains to dissociate Esther's refusal of Harold and her Transome inheritance from her acceptance of Felix to emphasize that what she decides on are the values that each man exemplifies, rather than the
men themselves. As Esther explains, "Since I have been at Transome Court I have seen many things very seriously. If I had not, I should not have left what I did leave. I made a deliberate choice" (Felix Holt, 602). Her mind is made up not by any certainty that Felix's love awaits her but by the sight of Mrs. Transome's misery, the "vision" that confirms her fears that the patriarchal values of Transome Court would turn her life, as they have turned Mrs. Transome's, into a "dreary waste of years empty of sweet trust and affection" (Felix Holt, 597).

The ideologically crucial dissociation of Esther's decisions from one another is achieved, however, at the expense of a more coherent delineation of Felix as Esther's love interest. The growth of their feelings for each other is abruptly truncated at the climactic moment of mutual revelation by Felix's resolution that "they must not marry - that they would ruin each other's lives" (Felix Holt, 419) as he believes their values to be incompatible. Though at first "she felt no trust that she could ever be good without him" (Felix Holt, 419), Esther's actions, culminating in her repudiation of her Transome inheritance, prove herself wrong. Her "power to refuse" (Nestor, 191) may, in the case of her relationship with Felix, be considered an initiatory rather than a reactionist force. Her choice, a sign of her commitment to the feminine values, prompts Felix to abandon his "will to be always apart from her" (Felix Holt, 419) and propose. The manner in which he asks her to marry him:
"'Could you share the life of a poor man, then, Esther?'" (Felix Holt, 601) reveals, particularly through the word "then", that he speaks only in reaction to the decision that she has made.

Felix's refusal "to give [him]self up to loving and being loved" (Felix Holt, 418) is nonetheless problematic because it seems to contradict his feminine values. He appears hypocritical in not giving the same emphasis to human relationships and passions in his own life that he tries to instill in other people's lives. His refusal to admit Esther into his life suggests a disparaging lack of faith in her ability to transcend her conventional values; this is in keeping with the apparently misogynist overtones of his avowal after their first encounter:

'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.' (Felix Holt, 156)

Felix's repudiation of Esther's love ironically makes him appear as supercilious and self-conceited as the patriarchal characters whose values he opposes. Nevertheless, the obviously hyperbolic nature of his declaration suggests that his words are not meant to be taken seriously. Rather, the unwarranted heat of his indignation seems more likely to be an amusingly inept attempt to repress his attraction to Esther in spite of himself. Unfortunately, few readers find Felix at all humorous - his words and his suppression of his feelings have added to the collective opinion in feminist readings that he harbours a sense of superiority that is oppressive and damaging to Esther.

Felix's insistence on separate paths in life for himself and Esther seems yet more inflexible and inconsistent with his professed values when juxtaposed against Mr. Lyon's renunciation of his promising career as an Independent Minister to love Annette whose Catholicism was anathema to the religious beliefs he holds dear. It seems as if Lyon is the man who truly lived according to the feminine values, putting his feelings and a human relationship above all other considerations. Nevertheless, Lyon's relationship with Annette falls short of the ideal of interdependence. She was "a being who had no glimpse of his
thoughts", whose inability to share his values made their life together "a period of such self-suppression and life in another as few men know" (*Felix Holt*, 173) for him. Though Lyon's loving self-sacrifice is in a sense heroic, his marriage to Annette illustrates Felix's fear of having to compromise his values if he were to commit himself to Esther when she was still ambivalent about her values.

Yet, Felix's suppression of his feelings is also a form of self-sacrifice. He would rather give up Esther's love than ask her to share a life for which she was then not truly ready; a life without the material comforts and advantages that she initially valued. His fears are twofold; while he worries about being drawn away from his life's purpose by a partner with conflicting values, he is also concerned that she may come to regret their life together. Vestiges of this anxiety for her surface in his need for reassurance even after she has accepted his subsequent proposal: "'I'm a rough, severe fellow, Esther. Shall you never repent? - never be inwardly reproaching me that I was not a man who could have shared your wealth? Are you quite sure?'" (*Felix Holt*, 603). Felix's apprehension implies that he ultimately accepts her as she is with her different priorities however much he may disagree with them and wish to encourage her to change them. By Eliot's definition, Felix's recognition and acceptance of Esther's difference, her "equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference"
(Middlemarch, 243), is an act of true sympathy. Significantly, the usually unchivalrous Felix refers to his renunciation of Esther as an act of chivalry, as the test of his "knighthood" (Felix Holt, 419). Unlike the conventional chivalry of Harold and Jermyn, Felix's is empowering; his decision not to bind Esther to him gives her the psychological space she needs to work out the conflicting needs in her own nature and to decide for herself her priorities in life.

Thus, the ambivalence that characterizes Felix's status as a Radical is also present in his role as a lover. On the one hand, his treatment of Esther seems harsh and patriarchal; on the other, he is an encouraging presence in her life offering liberating and empowering sympathy. Nevertheless, while the contradictions in Felix's Radicalism are essential to the novel's re-definition of the term and the critique of patriarchal values, his ambivalence as a lover is on the whole detrimental to his credibility. Eliot's inability to make a satisfactory lover out of Felix suggests firstly that she encountered difficulties in reconciling conventional ideas of masculine attractiveness with feminine values. Virility, decisiveness, competence, and a host of similar qualities traditionally thought to make a man sexually attractive to women make an awkward combination with sympathy, lovingness, consideration, and self-doubt. Secondly, there appears to be a failure of the imagination in depicting a relationship of mutual dependence
between the sexes, an ideal which eludes us even today. Eliot can only offer us her version of an ideal which, not being anchored in observable reality, readily invites dispute. She fares better in combining feminine values with masculine characters in fatherly roles. Rufus Lyon and Silas Marner are excellent examples.

Measured against *Felix Holt*'s revaluation of the feminine values, Mrs. Transome's feminist heroism lies in her "woman's keen sensibility and dread" (*Felix Holt*, 107), her feminine capacity for feelings, rather than the sexual rebellion and the aristocratic self-will encouraged by her patriarchal narcissism. Her "maiden need to have her hand kissed and be the object of chivalry" (*Felix Holt*, 201) and her refusal to expose Jermyn's turpitude, while reflecting her need to be superior, are yet expressions of her desire to love and be loved. Mrs. Transome's clinging to her ideal of love elevates her above the irredeemably selfish, opportunistic Jermyn. Alluding to Dante's story of the illicit lovers, Francesca and Paolo da Rimini, who bear their punishment in Hell together, Eliot comments: "There is heroism even in the circles of hell for fellow-sinners who cling to each other in the fiery whirlwind and never recriminate" (*Felix Holt*, 520). Even as she cannot bring herself to ask for Esther's sympathy, Mrs. Transome acknowledges mutual dependence as a desideratum in her life. She calls her faithful maid, Denner, "'a happy woman'" to have loved her mistress "'for forty years who is old and
weak now, and can't do without [her]'" (Felix Holt, 490). Mrs. Transome even finds herself wishing for the love and companionship of the husband whom she has always scorned: "She would have given a great deal at this moment if her feeble husband had not always lived in dread of her temper and her tyranny, so that he might be fond of her now. She felt herself loveless" (Felix Holt, 445).

Yet, her "woman's keen sensibility and dread" lie "screened behind all her petty habits and narrow notions, as some quivering thing with eyes and throbbing heart may lie crouching behind withered rubbish" (Felix Holt, 106-7). It is impossible not to notice the terror in the description of the poor cowed creature in hiding that personifies Mrs. Transome's feminine feelings. The intimidation of the feminine element in her nature is inevitable considering her involvement with the patriarchal matrix in which feelings are treated as a weakness either to be exploited or cruelly dismissed. A woman's subordinate position in patriarchy makes her feelings particularly vulnerable to abuse or suppression. As Mrs. Transome bitterly rants: "'A woman's love is always freezing into fear. She wants everything, she is secure of nothing ... What is the use of a woman's will? - if she tries, she doesn't get it, and she ceases to be loved. God was cruel when he made women'" (Felix Holt, 488).

Notwithstanding the sympathy and authorial self-identification that Bonnie Zimmerman finds in the portrayal of Mrs. Transome, Zimmerman views Mrs. Transome's suffering
as the novel's reactionary corrective to her "unwomany taste for "mastery"" (Zimmerman, 444). Far from reinforcing the patriarchal status quo, however, Mrs. Transome's plight illustrates the radical feminist point that it is futile for women to fight for equality on the uneven patriarchal battleground. The following passage in which Mrs. Transome is compared to a warlike empress reveals that in the patriarchal realm, victories are ultimately hollow:

She had that high-born imperious air which would have marked her as an object of hatred and reviling by a revolutionary mob. Her person was too typical of social distinctions to be passed by with indifference by any one; it would have fitted an empress in her own right, who had had to rule in spite of faction, to dare the violation of treaties and dread retributive invasions, to grasp after new territories, to be defiant in desperate circumstances, and to feel a woman's hunger of the heart for ever unsatisfied. (Felix Holt, 104; my italics)

Dorothea Barrett is of the opinion, however, that it is "hard to remember, when reading this passage that its subject is merely an adulterous wife. The metaphor monumentalizes her adultery, which then becomes an incident
of international importance rather than marginally affecting a few insignificant lives in Treby Magna" (Barrett, 107). It would appear that Barrett has disregarded the implications of the final line which undermines all the preceding descriptions of heroic might and audacity. Power is only an illusion for Mrs. Transome despite, or rather, because of her faithful adherence to the values of patriarchy. The aggrandizement of the self, breeding alienation, aggression, and annihilation, starves her of the life-affirming food of human attachment.

In its more complex depiction of the interaction between individual and society and its avoidance of an essentialist link between gender and values, *Felix Holt* takes the revaluation of feminine values beyond the achievements of *Romola*. The creation of Felix as a hero with feminine values, albeit flawed, and the portrayals of Esther and Mrs. Transome as women influenced by their society overturn the patriarchal doctrine of "biology is destiny". In the story of Mrs. Transome, moreover, Eliot offers a keen insight into the devious manner in which patriarchy deceives women into participating in their own oppression. The complexity of *Felix Holt*'s carefully juxtaposed multiple plots and its deconstructive inversion of conventional meanings enable Eliot to offer an acute critique of the patriarchal institutions of politics, the law, and chivalrous courtship that confirms her radical feminist realization of the destructiveness of patriarchal values.
Yet, *Felix Holt* has proven to be an unsatisfactory whole for a large number of readers. Its unorthodox redefinitions and radical feminist ideas, in particular, have unsettled many critics. Linda Bamber, who bases her reading of *Felix Holt* upon its reputation as Eliot's political novel, comes to the conclusion that Eliot's novels "ultimately say something that she does not mean; the plot of *Felix Holt* insists that politics are secondary to personal relationships" (Bamber, 434). To Bonnie Zimmerman, Eliot's reluctance to sanction liberal feminist efforts to place women on equal footing in the traditionally male sphere of public life evinces a disparaging belief that women's qualities are deficient compared to those of men: "Limited by inadequate education and imprisoned in their drawing rooms, women cannot independently mature. They need the higher standards of men - as the working class needs the educated classes - so as to assume their place beside them as responsible moral agents" (Zimmerman, 447). But *Felix Holt* does say precisely what Eliot means; that "personal relationships" are more important than "politics". Rather than suggesting that women need the "higher standards of men", Eliot points out instead that patriarchal society as a whole must be reformed in accordance with the "higher standards" of women, fostering sympathy and human attachment.