

## **“The Family Life that Does not Die with Death”: Continuity, Reproduction, and Inheritance in the Novels of E. M. Forster**

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The protagonist of *Maurice* (1971), experiences a sudden feeling of regret that his identity as a homosexual will prevent him from becoming a father and thereby leaving part of himself behind. Giving voice to this concern, the narrator reflects that Maurice and his lover Clive

would vanish utterly—would continue neither in Heaven nor on Earth. They had won past the conventions, but Nature still faced them, saying with even voice, “Very well, you are thus; I blame none of my children. But you must go the way of all sterility.” (97)

Maurice feels that it is only through sexual reproduction that one is rewarded with continuity, but the love he shares with Clive, though strong, can never have this result. Although he avoids explicit “blame” for his homosexual identity, he believes that Nature, the very force which instills these desires in him, will nonetheless punish him by causing his spirit to die out.

Maurice’s dawning consciousness that he will never reproduce leads him to the depressing thought that his relatives, who “might lack mind or heart,” are still capable of bearing children and thus extending their presence on earth (97). Clive, untroubled by this idea, believes that “for love to end where it begins is far more beautiful, and Nature knows it” (97). Maurice remains unconvinced, however, feeling a sense

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of unfairness. Forster feels that the basic human desire for an heir is a matter of special concern for homosexuals because their sexuality must necessarily frustrate it.

*Maurice* demonstrates with clarity a problem which Forster's other novels, less explicitly controversial in nature, each attempt in their own ways to tackle: the difficulty of arranging for oneself an heir who will carry on physical and spiritual life and thus grant a kind of earthly immortality. *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), *The Longest Journey* (1907), and *Howards End* (1910) each contain this theme in some variation. But, in each of these novels, it arises in the context of traditional heterosexual families. These other novels demonstrate the ways in which society, individuals, and nature itself inevitably complicate or obliterate what Forster calls the "divine hope of immortality" (*Where Angels* 51).

Forster's interest in the problem of perpetuating aspects of the self reflects in part his personal stake in genetic inheritance. His work can be contextualized in terms of what Elizabeth Heine (2006) discusses as a "turn-of-the-century belief that homosexuality could be both innate and inheritable" (293). Shortly before Forster began writing, scientists such as Gregor Mendel began to explore the specific method by which traits were passed down from generation to generation in all species. Theories about the biological basis of human psychology soon followed. Nineteenth century sexual psychologist Havelock Ellis (1921) investigated the heritability of sexual orientation and concluded that "the prospect of inverts [homosexuals] begetting children" could potentially be harmful:

[I]t must be pointed out that homosexuality is undoubtedly in many cases inherited. Often, it is true, the children turn out fairly well, but, in many cases, they bear witness that they belong to a neurotic and failing stock; Hirschfield [another sexual psychologist] goes so far as to say that it is always so, and concludes that from the eugenic standpoint the marriage of a homosexual person is always very risky.

Ellis posits that sexual preference may be linked to other heritable "weaknesses"; in many of the case studies he includes in his work,

“inverted” subjects reveal among their ancestors a telling “frequency of morbidity or abnormality—eccentricity, alcoholism, neurasthenia, insanity, or nervous disease—on one or both sides, in addition to inversion or apart from it” (“The Nature of Sexual Inversion”). Victorian genetic science thus seemed to support the notion that homosexuality was evidence of “neurotic and failing stock.” Ellis thus perceives the same natural force that worries Maurice. When homosexuals marry, he claims, their unions frequently “prove sterile. The tendency to sexual inversion in eccentric and neurotic families seems merely to be nature’s merciful method of winding up a concern which, from her point of view, has ceased to be profitable” (“Conclusions”). According to this Darwinian logic, “profitable” traits are those which augment and strengthen a family’s chances of surviving into future generations. Homosexuality represents a doomed genetic strand, the extinction of which will help to solidify the future of human evolution.

This phenomenon is certainly clear in *Maurice*. Clive inherits a vast familial estate, but his sexual identity makes him unable to produce an heir for it. Clive himself is physically small, weak, and sickly, a condition which manifests itself in a debilitating influenza near the end of his relationship with Maurice. But Clive’s is not only a physical weakness; this is but one symptom among a slew of biological and moral defects possessed by members of the Durham family. These “eccentric and neurotic” symptoms do not bode well for its future existence. When the protagonist visits Clive’s family home, he notes that “both the house and the estate were marked, not indeed with decay, but with the immobility that precedes it” (86). Clive must therefore marry a woman not only to carry on his family name but also to bring new blood (and new money) into an estate on the verge of ruin. And, in order to do so, Clive must not simply give up Maurice in favor of a heterosexual marriage. He must undergo a psychological and physical transformation into a heterosexual man in order to avoid the possibility of children who will provide damning evidence of his weak genetic background. Meanwhile, for Maurice, who does not choose to subvert his own sexual identity in favor of producing a successful heir, the question of how to achieve spiritual continuity lingers on.

In a biographical work about his great aunt, entitled *Marianne*

*Thornton* (1956), Forster touches on the theme of inheritance in a way that illuminates his extensive treatment of it in his novels. Henry S. Turner (2000) informs us that Forster himself inherited “the seed capital for a lifetime of investment, dividends, and freedom from conventional wage labor” from Thornton, which ultimately “left him free to pursue a career as a professional writer” (329). Forster asserts that Thornton “represented continuity. Childless herself, she became the family life that does not die with death” (qtd. in Childs 2008). She transferred inheritance to him diagonally, not simply vertically, from aunt to nephew rather than from parent to child; this nontraditional form of bequest gave him a new way of thinking about the process of inheritance in its entirety. The connection Thornton felt for Forster elevated the money and property she left him from a merely financial to a spiritual inheritance. From the more circuitous path she took to bequeath her worldly goods to her spiritual heir, Forster came to understand the possibility of a non-sexual form of reproducing aspects of the self. His aunt helped him to perceive fruitful alternative pathways to inheritance.

Inheritance in Forster’s novels frequently takes an even more circuitous route than it did in his actual experience. While Forster came into an inheritance bestowed on him by an aunt rather than a parent, some of his plots more radically challenge procedures for transmitting the “family life” from one generation to another. Like Marianne Thornton’s own bequest to Forster, these instances of transmission almost always necessitate a kind of spiritual screening process—he who will receive the benefactor’s goods and lands must somehow already show signs of close intellectual or emotional kinship.

Forster shows how this need to reproduce and “continue” is complicated even in the most traditional of heterosexual couplings. In Forster’s earlier novels, characters with no outright gay or lesbian identities fight, as do their queer counterparts in *Maurice*, against myriad obstacles to continuity. But, as Robert K. Martin (1997) argues, Forster develops a “reorganized vision of human relations in order to allow continuance without physical conception” (256). Although fully homosexual relationships do not arise outside *Maurice*, his other works nonetheless reveal a “drive toward an idealized male couple that could operate outside the boundaries of class and nation” (256). His novels

do frequently dramatize homoerotic or homosocial tendencies that form a large role in the spiritual perpetuation of characters who would otherwise fall victim to “nature’s merciful method” of extinction through sterility. This idea allows Forster to imagine a paradigm in which homosocial and, later, in *Maurice*, homosexual inheritance is capable of being spiritually if not biologically fruitful, and not only for the parties most directly involved.

### **“Divine Hope of Immortality” in *Where Angels Fear to Tread***

*Where Angels Fear to Tread* was published just two years after Forster received his inheritance from Marianne Thornton. On the surface, the primary conflict in the novel seems to be the ideological difference between Lilia Herriton’s stuffy English in-laws and her erratic, impassioned Italian husband, between which two extremes she and her new baby are caught and eventually disappear through their deaths. In the second half of the novel, however, a new conflict centered on Lilia’s brother-in-law, Philip, emerges and takes focus. In a letter to critic R. C. Trevelyan (1905), Forster explains that “the object of the book is the improvement of Philip” (137). In the novel, Philip derives new aesthetic and emotional values and a broader understanding of his circumstances through his contact with Gino, and although Gino’s biological son dies, the novel ensures that something of the father is carried on into future generations. Forster suggests that although producing an heir who will be inundated with one’s spiritual life may be impossible biologically, it is very possible to ensure that this life will continue by invoking non-traditional (and very frequently homosocial) means of transmission.

What is notable in this novel is that each character who expresses anxiety over his offspring wants to reproduce a perfect copy of himself. Hoping to eliminate the intellectual and emotional influence of another parent, these characters reveal the impulse to render the other parent inert and, in a sense, sterile. For instance, Lilia’s daughter Irma is raised by her “Granny” – neither by her mother nor by her maternal grandmother, but by Lilia’s mother-in-law, “who hate[s] the title of Granny” and who oversees the child’s upbringing with a proverbial iron fist (4). Although Mrs. Herriton seems to enjoy being the caregiver of this young person, she takes on the role of parent as a duty rather

than as an act of maternal devotion. She is “anxious to form [Irma] before her mother arrive[s]” home from Italy, so that she will never again be able to revert to the characteristics of the “vulgar child” her mother would theoretically have raised her to become (9). But doing so requires a reconstruction of Lilia’s own character on the part of the Herritons, so that her flaws are minimized as best they can be. For instance, when reading Irma letters written by her mother, she “carefully correct[s] any grammatical errors” (8). Clearly Mrs. Herriton realizes the danger in allowing Lilia to influence Irma in matters large and small. She fears that Irma, wishing to emulate her mother, would deviate from the Herritons’ narrow path of decorum, grammatical and otherwise.

In choosing to marry Gino, Lilia complicates the Herritons’ desire to neutralize her influence in the family. The Herritons would like her to remain unmarried so that she never has an opportunity to sully the family character by reproducing her own unrefined nature in another offspring problematically related to themselves. Lashing out against her rash decision to marry an Italian, Philip claims: “I will save you in order to save Irma and our name”; he seeks to control her romantic life, to “save” her from her own desire, to protect the character of the family and the daughter whose primary function as he sees it is to preserve the Herriton heritage (27).

The baby that Lilia bears provokes a crisis. On the one hand, the Herritons perceive an opportunity to annex an heir and mold him to her moral standard. Irma desires “to be the first to teach him the Ten Commandments and the Catechism” (59), imperiously spreading Protestantism and other middle-class English beliefs and practices into the wider world. But on the other hand, Mrs. Herriton fears that his cultural otherness might pollute the Herriton character. Irma attempts to identify with the baby, wondering if he is “an English baby born abroad” or if his Italian birth means that he is wholly Italian and therefore subject to different patterns of early learning and language acquisition. If the baby’s assimilation proves impossible, at least the Herritons can prevent his existence from threatening the power they already wield over Irma’s character.

However the question of whether to adopt (or even recognize) the baby as one of their own is expressed out of more than simply a

concern for Irma's future identity. Irma's maternal urges and her fascination with her new Italian sibling frighten Mrs. Herriton and Harriet because they are uncertain whether they ought even to recognize him as one of their own, a fellow British citizen and Protestant subject. "The beastly baby is Italian, after all" (60)—Othered by virtue of his paternity and by the location of his birth. His "beastliness" severely undercuts the possibility that he might grow into an English gentleman. As Philip flippantly suggests, it might be useless to try to make him a member of the family.

Additionally, Irma's claim on the child brings with it a claim on that child's father, "her 'new father,'" of whom Harriet pronounces, "He is the devil" (59). The Herritons perceive a danger in welcoming this baby into Irma's life: she could become acquainted with an Italian father whose own influence could not help but be felt in Irma's consciousness. This would undoubtedly complicate the purity and continuity of Irma's Herriton characteristics.

Mrs. Herriton, of course, later decides upon adoption. The fear that Miss Abbott will generate a scandal, claiming that by failing to adopt Gino's baby the Herritons prove that they "neglect [their] relatives, etc.," causes her to rethink her position on the child's future welfare: she decides to "rescue poor Lilia's baby from that horrible man, who will bring it up either as a Papist or an infidel—who will certainly bring it up to be vicious" (63). The baby is now decisively "poor Lilia's," and its father is nothing more than a "horrible man" whose threat to its moral development cannot be ignored. The adoption process will, therefore, be tantamount to a preservation of the Herriton genetic characteristics itself. By disproving the rumor which Caroline will undoubtedly spread, Mrs. Herriton believes, the family reputation can free itself from potential infamy and continue to live on indefinitely in its splendor. And it will also conveniently provide for its continuation by acquiring another heir, another physical manifestation of the Herriton essence.

Meanwhile, Lilia's Italian husband feels equally certain that fatherhood will give him a means to his own immortality:

His one desire was to become the father of a man like himself,  
and it held him with a grip he only partially understood, for it

was the first great desire, the first great passion of his life. Falling in love was a mere physical triviality, like warm sun or cool water, beside this divine hope of immortality: "I continue."  
(50)

This need marks him as part of the "exception" of men who fully realize what it means that "physical and spiritual life may stream out of [them] forever" (100). It is impossible for him to relinquish control of the child's upbringing, then, because the need to "continue" cannot tolerate any foreign influence. To ensure that he can retain his position as prime parent after Lilia's death, he will remarry a woman who will "do exactly what [he] tell[s] her," and will not interfere with the molding of the child's "spiritual life" into a facsimile of himself. Even his own parents represent a threat to this process: Gino suspects that they "would separate our thoughts" (101). He fears that the baby would become less his father's son and more the recipient of a broader familial or societal inheritance. He surpasses even the Herritons in his desire to eradicate all outside influences in the child's upbringing, even familial influences that helped to form his own character, in the creation of his own perfect copy.

Marriage with Lilia, then, is simply a means to an end for Gino—she becomes little more than the incubator for his progeny rather than an equal partner in the creation of life. He negates her influence in his description of the baby's physical characteristics. "Who would have believed his mother was blonde?" Gino thinks to himself; "For he is brown all over...And he is mine; mine for ever. Even if he hates me he will be mine. He cannot help it; he is made out of me; I am his father" (101). The "physical life" of the father having been successfully reproduced in the person of his son, it is now necessary to oversee the child's psychological formation so that this "divine hope of immortality" can be fulfilled.

Like the immortality of the soul in which the Catholic Gino probably also believes, if only vaguely, this earthly immortality in the form of his son's birth takes on religious connotation. It is, again, a "divine hope," and requires that he give candles to Santa Deodata, the local church, as well as copiously repeated prayers, in order for Providence to allow its occurrence. Forster identifies these prayers as

the “crude, uncouth prayers of the simple,” but clearly they stem from something deeper than a mere hope for earthly possessions or success (50). They articulate “the strongest desire that can come to a man” (101). Gino elevates the desire to extend his own existence in the being of his son into a personal religion.

Not insignificantly, it is during moments of physical conflict between Gino and Philip that this “strongest desire” is realized in the transfer of some kind of inheritance, although not in the way which Gino has envisioned. Forster describes Philip as “a person who has scarcely ever felt the physical forces that are banging about in the world, and [who] couldn’t get good by spiritual suffering alone” (Letter 138). Thus it is fitting, as Ruth Padel (2007) argues, that Philip’s “moral rescue comes out of contact with Gino” (xvi). In first being pushed onto the bed by Gino in an argument about Lilia’s marriage, and finally during an out-and-out fight in which his bruised and battered body takes yet another beating at the hands of his Italian aggressor following the death of Gino’s baby, a change is initiated in Philip which “proceeds from nothing admirable... [b]ut [which] angels and other practical people will accept . . . reverently, and write it down as good” (*Where Angels* 82). The brief brawl between Philip and Gino is identified by Forster as “sacramental” (Letter 138)—in it, they achieve a moment of unity, despite the violence which makes it possible. This violence allows the noncommittal and sexually isolated Philip to connect with another man in a way that he could not otherwise accomplish. Philip is purified through violence, and can better internalize Gino’s spirit.

Of course, Gino comes to the realization that he will probably not have another child and thereby achieve the kind of earthly immortality of which he dreams: After Gino and Philip share the milk which would have been consumed by the now-deceased child, Gino’s servant Perfetta accidentally breaks the milk jug. “It does not matter,” he soothes her. “It will never be wanted any more” (127). Nor will there likely be a biological heir for Philip, whose hopes for marriage with Miss Abbott are dashed when he learns of her love for Gino. But in the absence of such conventional forms of reproduction and inheritance, Forster nonetheless provides his characters with an immortality of spirit—not in the conventional discourse of an afterlife, but in the transmission of a central idea, belief, or understanding from

one man to another. Gino is able to pass on a part of himself to Philip—a (typically Italian, for Forster) appreciation for passionate physicality and a deeper connection to life than Philip could have achieved through cold theorizing. Philip will carry this inheritance back to England where it will live on in the stuffy middle-class world, beautifying a life that was once stagnant.

### **“This Hereditary Business is Too Awful:” Sterility in *The Longest Journey***

Like *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, *The Longest Journey* demonstrates the difficulty of attempting to pass on inheritance to one’s children. With similar themes of dying offspring and anxiety for the termination of one’s hereditary essence, characters in this novel work through problems like sterility, physical weakness, and intellectual torpor as they attempt to ensure their earthly continuance. In *The Longest Journey*, Forster imagines an alternative mode of inheritance by means of actual brotherhood, a relationship which leads to the sort of diagonal inheritance pattern from which Forster himself benefitted. Protagonist Rickie Elliot cannot fulfill his desire to have a child who bears all of his spiritual and intellectual gifts without the burden of his physical frailty. But he can pass on these non-physical traits to his stronger half-brother Stephen, who, in turn, will pass them down to his daughter to guard against their extinction.

Like Ellis’ “inverts,” whose ancestry is peppered with physical and mental deformity, Rickie cannot hope to produce a healthy child at the end of the novel. This seems to be nature’s way of resolving a problem that would otherwise worsen in future generations by ending the familial line altogether. Lame from birth, a condition which he has inherited from his own father, Rickie even provokes his future wife’s concern: “Why shouldn’t he be like other people?” Agnes asks. “This hereditary business is too awful” (18). Like Ellis, who discusses gays’ sexual preference as a means to an evolutionary end, Agnes constructs the “business” of Rickie’s inheritance as “winding up a concern which...has ceased to be profitable.” As a “business,” rather than as a spiritual endeavor, Rickie’s potential for parenthood is jeopardized by his disability, either because, as Agnes assumes at the time, he will be unmarketable to the opposite sex, or because, as she will soon learn,

even his normative sexual activity will yield no viable offspring as a result.

Rickie struggles and fails to overcome what Elizabeth Heine (2006) describes as his “conventional desire for procreation and fatherhood” by marrying and allowing himself to indulge in this desire despite his knowledge that these actions could prove harmful (292). During Agnes’ unexpected pregnancy, Rickie, like Gino, views his impending fatherhood as a mystical drive toward which he is compelled by the strength of his very nature:

That November the supreme event approached. He saw it with Nature’s eyes... In the midst of lessons he would grow dreamy, as one who spies a new symbol for the universe, a fresh circle within the square. Within the square shall be a circle, within the circle another square, until the visual eye is baffled. Here is meaning of a kind. His mother had forgotten herself in him. He would forget himself in his son. (211)

Like his mother, Rickie seeks to “forget himself” in the metaphorical fractals of hereditary bestowal. Rather than striving to duplicate himself as Gino does, Rickie envisions parenthood as a self-effacing process in which he can become absorbed—perhaps as a tool for evading the misery of his current marriage. Despite the apparent difference from the selfishly motivated Gino, however, Rickie still imagines his child somehow organically absorbing all of his positive traits and talents. He seems to forget Agnes’ role in the production of this child, and the influence she would likely wield on her personal growth. The baby, had she lived, would have been the source of Rickie’s emotional comfort, as well as the means by which Rickie would have hoped to achieve spiritual continuation when his own spirit was being stifled by Agnes, rather than an individual.

Rickie’s drive to pass on a spiritual essence remains despite his failure in producing a biological heir. Eventually this drive is made manifest through his relationship with his half-brother Stephen, who, though always capable of reproducing healthy offspring successfully, must now grow to understand why it is important that he continue on in the first place. The bestowal of ideals from one brother to the other,

demonstrated by Rickie's change of lifestyle from husband and teacher to writer and bachelor, is the medium through which the transfer of this spiritual inheritance takes place. Rickie's choice to leave Agnes and begin a writing career prompts Aunt Emily to question his motives, and he answers that "the world is real again" (313), that through writing he is able to take pleasure in something solid rather than being relegated to nothing more than philosophical speculation. Likewise, Stephen asserts to Pembroke after Rickie's death: "Look at that—and up behind where the Plain begins and you get on the solid chalk—think of us riding one night when you're ordering your hot bottle—that's the world" (323). Through his brother's writing, as well as through his person, Stephen learns how to combine a new abstract, philosophical understanding of the world with his concrete experience of it. Rather than leaving behind another child whose probable lameness would problematize the transmission of his inheritance, Rickie finds a way to bequeath his body of writing, and symbolically his spirit, to his brother. Hence not only does Ricky discover an alternative way to reproduce himself through his brotherly bond, influencing Stephen's outlook on art and life; his brother takes an active role in protecting his creative life as it manifests itself physically, in the form of his written work.

In death, Rickie is finally freed from the inheritance he has received from his father: his own weak body. His legs are crushed by a train when he hurls his drunken brother's body off of the tracks. But another part of him remains intact and lives on, strong and healthy, through his brother and yet-unborn niece. Rickie's aunt Emily describes him in a letter afterwards as "one who failed in all he undertook; one of the thousands whose dust returns to dust" (319); his brother-in-law is convinced that "death is merciful when it weeds out a failure" (325). These characters also echo Ellis' logic, believing that those with weak genes, biological "failures," are destined to become obsolete within a generation. In actuality, however, imagery of gardening and the dust of the earth reinforces the fact that Rickie is no failure at all, because he preserves part of himself within his brother. By "weeding out" the parts of himself that he inherits from his father—which in reality are physical only—he prepares the soil for a richer harvest planted by his mother's line. That Stephen's own father was a farmer strengthens

this symbolism; Stephen's own strong connection to the earth, inherited from this father, makes him the perfect candidate to nurture the family spirit when suburban, effectively sterile Rickie cannot.

But Rickie's continuance is demonstrated through Stephen at an even deeper level. "Though he could not phrase it," Stephen comprehends that "he guided the future of our race, and that, century after century, his thoughts and his passions would triumph in England" (326). Not only does Rickie's life live on in his brother, but it will continue to influence the much larger sphere of the nation indefinitely. Stephen's mammoth success is in part Rickie's success, and through Rickie, the success of their mother, whose name and spirit, Forster implies, will live on together in the body of Stephen's daughter. Rickie has believed along with his society that sexual reproduction is the surest method of creating an ideal heir, while the means to the kind of continuation he truly requires has existed all along in the form of a spiritual connection with his brother. As he discusses more explicitly in *Maurice*, Forster addresses the possibility of a bond between two members of the same sex, brothers in this case, to serve as a channel for the passing of hereditary material where biological reproduction fails.

### ***Howards End* and "Unproductive Branches" in the Family Estate**

The title *Howards End* refers to a country house which is the hereditary property of Mrs. Wilcox, the wife of a wealthy rubber trader. Forster characterizes the house as a symbol of the Wilcox's "family life which does not die with death," identified throughout Forster's works as the spiritual existence which characters long to perpetuate. *Howards End* functions as more than a mere edifice to be passed down within a family in accordance with traditional inheritance practices. Its uniqueness as a physical manifestation of this "family life" requires a new form of inheritance, or, more controversially, an upending of the notion that material property can properly transmit spiritual "life" and fulfill the basic need to leave something permanent behind. As in Forster's earlier novels, *Howards End* questions conventional modes of inheritance, especially those that rely on heterosexual reproduction, and demonstrates how the unique circumstances of individual lives often problematize this transmission.

He then offers an alternative in the form of same-sex friendship and “fraternity” (or, in this case, “sorority”), a phenomenon which ensures that the spiritual life of a family finds an unconventional path forward.

The matriarch of the Wilcox family desires not to create an identical physical reproduction of herself in hopes that she can live on into the future, in the style of Gino and the Herritons of *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. Instead, she is guided by an understanding of her ethereal role as the bearer of a spiritual life, handed down from her ancestors, and her mission to bequeath it to the most appropriate vessel—even if this vessel takes the form, not of her own child, but of someone outside her immediate family circle.

Like Gino in another sense, however, Mrs. Wilcox attributes to her own role as Howards End’s proprietor a sense of religious meaning: “One knew that she worshipped the past, and that the instinctive wisdom which the past alone can bestow had descended upon her” (18). This veneration takes the “divine hope of immortality” in a different direction from that toward which Lilia’s husband drives. Whereas Gino’s desire to reproduce is selfish, involving a perfect physical and spiritual copy of himself to carry on into the future, Mrs. Wilcox appreciates that her own life is in part a monument to her own multifaceted ancestral heritage, and as such, is too complicated and nuanced to yield an unaltered replica. Any attempt to preserve indefinitely her individual identity would only reaffirm the fact that she is not merely an individual, but a product of the collective efforts of her predecessors to ensure that *they* have left a part of themselves behind. She doesn’t impart her inheritance through individual need, but through the cumulative need of past generations.

Mrs. Wilcox’s share in the “instinctive wisdom” of her ancestors—“that wisdom to which we clumsily give the name of aristocracy”—marks her as somehow outside of the inheritance patterns called for by the very nobility with which she is commonly associated by those who know her. Any “clumsy” designation of social class and familial position would be inadequate to fully account for the success with which those predecessors have accomplished this preservation: it is not because they have money and property that they live on; rather, it is because they unselfishly respect their role in the perpetuation of an ongoing family life. Their collective efforts weave a magical web

around the property itself, barring all but the most worthy from taking on the position of guardian. “High-born she might not be,” we are told, “but assuredly she cared about her ancestors, and let them help her” (18).

Although Mrs. Wilcox feels a deep and spiritual connection to her family estate, her husband and children only perceive it as a financial asset and the social base from which they have extended their socio-economic influence. Forster implies that this outlook is a manifestation of an imperialistic drive. Led by a father who has made his career with the “Imperial and West African Rubber Company” (155), the young Wilcoxes possess “the colonial spirit, and [are] always making for some spot where the white man might carry his burden unobserved” (161). Howards End is the house in which Paul, Charles, and Evie share the majority of their childhood, and the house represents “Mother England” in the imperial metaphor. These unimaginative colonists must first industrialize the home front by transforming “the paddock that [Mrs. Wilcox] had loved more dearly than the garden itself” into a garage for the automobiles which make them fully mobile and more capable of conquest (74). Then they must engage in the systematic annexation of more distant properties, such as the London flat on Ducie Street, Oniton Grange, and Charles Wilcox’s suburban home at Hilton. Paul, the younger son, even ventures as far as Africa.

These figurative and literal imperial campaigns correspond to the mode of heterosexual reproduction that Forster associates with selfishness. Charles Wilcox demonstrates Forster’s premise that successful sexual reproduction does not necessarily lead to successful or ideal conditions of inheritance. As Gino longs to do in Forster’s first novel, Charles fathers multiple children, thereby creating perfect images of himself in his suburban colony:

He and Dolly are sitting on the deck chairs. . . . A short-frocked edition of Charles also regards them placidly; a perambulator edition is squeaking; a third edition is expected shortly. Nature is turning out Wilcoxes in this peaceful abode, so that they may inherit the earth. (161)

The narrator caustically theorizes that Charles Wilcox’s branch of the

family will “inherit the earth,” whatever that entails for them, because they are blessed by “Nature.” His narrator also characterizes Charles’ children as “editions” of himself, like reprinted versions of the same book: newer, but bearing the same content. Charles has achieved a perfect duplication of himself on more than one occasion, an accomplishment for which other characters like Gino and Mrs. Herriton yearn. But the tone of this passage reaffirms Forster’s belief that however successfully a man like Charles Wilcox achieves this goal, his collection of “editions” is somehow bereft of an emotional depth necessary for the spiritual inheritance idealized by his mother (and by Forster).

By contrast, Margaret Schlegel and her sister are primarily occupied with “spiritual things, an ‘unseen’ that transcends, rather than clinging mercilessly, to the human experience,” and their own inheritance seems much more cerebral than it is material (334). Appropriately, Margaret demonstrates these dual interests in her discussion of the sway a house can possess in the psyche of its inhabitants. Rapidly nearing the date upon which the lease expires on their deceased father’s “ordinary London house,” the Schlegel sisters feel little connection to the home of their childhood; nevertheless Margaret intuits that “Howards End must be a very different house to ours,” and attempts to understand the importance which it holds for Mrs. Wilcox (60). Even without ever having experienced the pull of the birthplace which her friend describes, Margaret is capable of imagining how strong this pull might be, given the right “property” and the right owner. Later, as she appreciates that Mrs. Wilcox’s home symbolically represents the family spirit she embodies, Margaret finally comes to see that “the moment was solemn when she invited a friend to share this passion with her,” for Howards End is not mere “brick and mortar” to Mrs. Wilcox but has been transformed into a “Holy of Holies” (68).

Mrs. Wilcox recognizes that Margaret, rather than any member of her biological family, is the rightful heir of Howards End. None of Mrs. Wilcox’s offspring are capable of developing the nurturing quality which thrives in the environment of this country house, and allows it to thrive as well, for

[t]o them, Howards End was a house: they could not know

that to [their mother] it had been a spirit, for which she sought a spiritual heir. And—pushing one step farther in these mists—may they not have decided even better than they supposed? Is it credible that the possessions of the spirit can be bequeathed at all? Has the soul offspring? (79)

To these last two questions Mrs. Wilcox would answer an unequivocal “yes.” But her children, who are spiritually so dissimilar to herself, cannot even concede to the existence of the “soul’s offspring,” much less make a distinction between them and the offspring of the flesh.

And in the past the house itself, so firmly rooted in the notion of what is “natural” or “productive,” contains elements which need not be merely functional to its inhabitants, but which give proof of their continuance nevertheless. For instance, although Charles is able to persuade Mrs. Wilcox to relinquish the pony’s paddock, there remains “the vine—she had got her way about the vine. It still encumbered the south wall with its unproductive branches” (74). This vine bears a metaphorical resemblance to the function of non-sexually reproductive inheritance. To Charles, it is perhaps nothing more than a frivolous decoration—one which he finds unappealing, moreover, because it “encumbers” a wall of his property and seems to rebuke his ownership, and because it does so without yielding fruits which could be harvested for his use. But for Mrs. Wilcox, these branches foreshadow the pattern of inheritance by which her beloved house will be inherited: like the vine, Margaret is also unfruitful; she also “encumbers” the property and disinherits the über-fruitful Charles and his slew of hearty young children.

Thus Margaret finds herself the recipient of this alternative form of inheritance—not merely of a house, once again, but of the singular passion of Mrs. Wilcox’s life. Her spiritual kinship to Mrs. Wilcox is all that is required to prove the legitimacy of her inheritance. Even when the Wilcoxes attempt to keep her from her rightful home, Margaret unwittingly overcomes their plot—unaware that *Howards End* has been her spiritual possession all along. Although the threat of sexual “sterility” which looms so dreadfully over the heads of Forster’s other protagonists also threatens to end the continuity of Mrs. Wilcox’s spiritual legacy with Margaret, who does not have a child, Margaret

comes to the conclusion at the novel's end that she "does not love children," and is "thankful to have none" (267). Her sister Helen, however, does have a child, and like Forster himself, this child will be able to reap the benefits of his aunt's inheritance. Margaret's possession of the house provides conclusive evidence that the "family life that does not die with death" sometimes finds an heir outside the family, and can flourish in the absence of biological channels of inheritance.

This conclusion suggests that in *Howards End*, as Alistair M. Duckworth (1992) posits, "the convincing union is not between a man and a woman but between sisters," between Helen and Margaret most obviously but also, I would suggest, between Mrs. Wilcox and Margaret (79). By leaving her house to Margaret, Mrs. Wilcox heals the rift between Margaret and Helen. *Howards End* becomes the stage on which this is carried out at the end of the novel, and the spiritual life embodied in it cements the "union" of the homosocial community of sisters. Raising Helen's son between themselves, Margaret and Helen will be able to impart this inheritance without the influence of a male parent.

Forster's praise of homosocial connections does not even extend to siblings of the opposite gender. *Howards End's* Tibby is as useless and pedantic as *Where Angels Fear to Tread's* Harriet Herriton is unstable and irrational. But as horrible as these siblings are, the protagonists of their respective novels manage to come into the fullness of their spiritual inheritance despite the often adverse pull of their genetic relationships. Same-sex friends and siblings seem to be the closest available devices Forster possesses, before or after the realization of his own sexual identity, to describe the transmission of spiritual DNA to an audience unwilling, he feared, to accept the homosexual relationship that he depicts in *Maurice*.

And now let us return to that last-published novel, in which Forster bypasses the conventional prejudices of this audience and tells the story which is perhaps dearest to him: a story of love, sexual passion, and the sharing of a hereditary tradition—between men.

### **Maurice and Spiritual Education**

It becomes necessary for Forster's characters to find some alternative to the traditional mode of inheritance, given the different

circumstances which preclude them from bearing children or from producing the sort that are worthy to carry on the “life of the family.” As Heine has written about *The Longest Journey*, *Maurice* can be read generally as an effort to come to terms “with a life which forgoes the possibility of procreation” (292). The hero of this novel, perhaps like Forster himself, seeks to find some consolation or reprieve from the knowledge that he will be biologically infertile.

This search likewise becomes the driving force behind characters like Gino of *Where Angels Fear to Tread* and *The Longest Journey*’s Rickie, who are physically capable of reproduction but somehow fail in the endeavor to do so, and for *Howards End*’s Mrs. Wilcox, who realizes that although she has been successfully able to reproduce genetically, she must look outside of her biological family for the person to whom she can most appropriately bestow her spirit and its symbol, her home. As a homosexual, Maurice is stripped by his own sexual identity of all hope of conventional reproduction and forced into searching for alternatives.

In the end, the protagonist of *Maurice* finally comes to grasp the unique position in which he is placed. Rather than being marginalized by a system of genetic reproduction, Maurice can undertake a different and, in his view, more sublime path towards extending his life in the world. Love between Clive and himself first takes on the role of an instrument through which the emotions and perspectives of the former could be transmitted to the latter: Clive “educated Maurice, or rather his spirit educated Maurice’s spirit” (98); this “education” goes deeper than the kind the two men receive at Cambridge and encompasses the deepest levels of psychological and emotional understanding. Now Maurice is able to recognize to whom he is indebted for the full development of his character: “‘Who taught you to talk like this?’ Clive [asks]. ‘You, if anyone,’” Maurice replies (245). Even though Clive’s symbolic death through his renunciation of homosexuality has already taken place, he leaves behind him a spiritual heir in the body of his former lover, who in turn passes on his own “inheritance” to Alec.

But the legacy Maurice himself will leave behind is greater than that with which Clive entrusts him. His affair with and later commitment to Alec also forms part of his spiritual inheritance, for,

as Parminder Kaur Bakshi (1996) claims, “Clive had taught him how to sublimate desire,” while Alec teaches him the strength of the “force of physical fulfillment” (191). Maurice surpasses Clive by moving from the theoretical realm of homosexuality to its real-world application in the context of a healthy sexual and romantic relationship. Whereas Clive’s stuffy Greco-Roman tomes advocated Platonic love devoid of physicality, Clive and Alec know that real satisfaction is to be found not in the ruins of Greek culture but in the immediacy of contemporary Britain. They come to the triumphant understanding that “England belonged to them. That, besides companionship, was their reward” (239). And England, Maurice hopes, will inherit the family life which he and Alec begin to shape as the novel closes.

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