

ROMOLA

MARY ANN (MARIAN) EVANS was born in 1819 in Warwickshire. She attended schools in Nuneaton and Coventry, coming under the influence of evangelical teachers and clergymen. In 1836 her mother died and Marian became her father's housekeeper, educating herself in her spare time. In 1841 she moved to Coventry, and met Charles and Cara Bray, local progressive intellectuals. Through them she was commissioned to translate Strauss's *Life of Jesus* and met the radical publisher John Chapman, who, when he purchased the *Westminster Review* in 1851, made her his managing editor. Having lost her Christian faith and thereby alienated her family, she moved to London and met Herbert Spencer and the versatile man of letters George Henry Lewes. Lewes was separated from his wife, but with no possibility of divorce. In 1854 he and Marian decided to live together, and did so until Lewes's death in 1878. It was he who encouraged her to turn from philosophy and journalism to fiction, and during those years, under the name of George Eliot, she wrote *Scenes of Clerical Life*, *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner*, *Romola*, *Felix Holt*, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, as well as numerous essays, articles and reviews. George Eliot died in 1880, only a few months after marrying J.W. Cross, an old friend and admirer, who became her first biographer. She was buried beside Lewes at Highgate. George Eliot combined a formidable intelligence with imaginative sympathy and acute powers of observation, and became one of the greatest and most influential of English novelists. Her choice of material widened the horizons of the novel and her psychological insights radically influenced the novelist's approach to characterization.

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GEORGE ELIOT

Romola

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INTRODUCTION

For many Victorian readers, among them Henry James, *Romola* was George Eliot's finest achievement; today it is the least read of her novels. This may be partly due to its difficulty: set in Renaissance Florence, and taking in at a sweep the French invasion of Italy, the rise and fall of Savonarola, and the story of its eponymous heroine, *Romola* makes heavy demands on the reader. Some critics have cited its pivotal place in the George Eliot canon as a reason for reviving interest: her earlier novels rely on her intimate knowledge of small rural English communities and limit themselves – on the surface – to the concerns of those communities; her later novels are narrated with the confidence of a major intellectual, their frames of reference are broad and eclectic, their concerns national and international. But I would like to recommend *Romola* for its own sake: especially for readers interested in gender, language, and history, the difficulty of reading is more than offset by the novel's complex and intriguing treatment of these three issues – issues that are at the core of contemporary literary criticism and theory.

Before turning to their treatment in the text, I would like to indicate various contexts that can illuminate the reading of *Romola*: the historical – George Eliot's life, Victorian London, Renaissance Florence, and the unification of Italy; the aesthetic – Italian Renaissance literature and art, the historical novel, and George Eliot's other works; and the philosophical – ancient and Renaissance thought, positivism, and evolutionary theory. Each of these contexts has been treated in detail by at least one of the critics recommended in the Selected Bibliography.

A GLANCE AT THE LIFE OF GEORGE ELIOT

Born in 1819, she was the daughter of a Warwickshire land agent. Both her parents were respected in their small rural community as efficient, shrewd, and hard-working people; neither had the education or the interest in books likely to nurture a novelist. Nevertheless, with the encouragement and example of two dedicated teachers, Marian Evans developed the scholarly turn of mind, the commitment to literature and philosophy, and the meticulous attention to her own prose style that were eventually to take her to the centre of London intellectual and literary life.

By the age of twenty-one, when she moved with her father, now widowed and retired, to Foleshill near Coventry, she was well versed in literature and theology, and could read Latin, Greek, French, German, and Italian. Throughout her adolescence and early youth she had been deeply religious, with an austere evangelical fervour that was far in excess of her immediate family's quiet piety. At Foleshill, however, in the atmosphere of free thought and earnest discussion that pervaded the social circle of her new friends Charles and Cara Bray, she came to such profound doubt of the literal truth of the Bible that she no longer considered herself a Christian. Her doubt was as all-consuming as her faith had been. In 1841 she published a translation of David Strauss's *The Life of Jesus*, to be followed in 1854 by her translation of Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*. Both books were major contributions to the 'higher criticism' and were central to the Victorian debate on faith and doubt.

Between these two publications enormous changes took place in her personal life. Her father died in 1849, leaving her a small income and unwonted freedom; in 1851, she moved to London, where she worked as the unacknowledged editor of *The Westminster Review*; and in 1854 she embarked on her long partnership of love and work with the philosopher and critic G.H. Lewes. They lived together until Lewes's death in 1878.

In 1857 'George Eliot' appeared in print for the first time. The three stories that were collectively published as *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858) and her first novel *Adam Bede* (1859) were written with explicitly masculine narrative voices that supported the fiction of male authorship, but by July 1859 George Eliot's true identity was generally known. A story written in the first person from a male viewpoint and significantly entitled 'The Lifted Veil' appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* that month. Thereafter, the mask of the male narrator is abandoned, and George Eliot's novels are narrated by what have been seen by some commentators as feminine voices and, by others, as simply human ones, narrating from a point beyond gender.

The Mill on the Floss appeared in 1860, *Silas Marner* in 1861, *Romola* in 1863, and *Felix Holt* in 1866. By the 1870s George Eliot's reputation was established as the greatest living novelist in English and even, for some, as the greatest literary figure to have arisen since the death of Goethe in 1832. Despite disapproval of her union with Lewes (they were not legally married), her drawing-room became a place of intellectual and literary pilgrimage, and it was in this atmosphere of victory over inauspicious beginnings that she produced what many consider her finest works, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*.

George Eliot died in 1880. Her literary reputation declined after her death, largely because of the prevailing opinion among the next two generations that her works epitomized Victorian didacticism. It was not until the mid twentieth century that she was restored to the critical esteem she had enjoyed in her lifetime.

Her life and work were fully immersed in the central debates of her day. Faith and doubt, evolutionary theory, and biblical criticism were perennial concerns for her; her entire *oeuvre* is threaded through with a long meditation on 'the Woman Question'; and science, medicine, education, and electoral reform are recurring issues in her novels.

In the course of nearly a century and a half of criticism, many George Eliots have emerged: the earnest moralist, the imitator of great men, the secular preacher, the Victorian sage, the honorary man, the tender-hearted woman, the disinterested scholar, the hypocrite, the reactionary, the subversive, the supporter of patriarchy, the feminist, the androgynous precursor of post-feminism, the ultimate exponent of 'classic realism', the first modern novelist. The very variety of these readings is enough to indicate the complexity with which we are confronted when we approach the works of George Eliot.

GENDER, LANGUAGE, AND HISTORY IN ROMOLA

(i) Contexts and Correspondences

Romola is set in the 1490s in the city-state of Florence. Over the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Florence had established an independent communal form of government. Representatives were elected from the membership lists of the twenty-one guilds or

professional associations (the Silk Merchants' Guild, the Doctors and Apothecaries' Guild, etc.). By the late fourteenth century, however, the constitution had been gradually changed, the number of representatives had been reduced, as had their rights to initiate legislation, so that Florence was effectively ruled by a small patrician oligarchy. Of the ruling families, the Medici were the richest, and with the return of Cosimo de' Medici from brief exile in 1434, they were established as the ruling family of Florence. Having made their fortune in international banking, the scions of the house of Medici were free to develop more attractive interests: Lorenzo was a poet and a patron of the arts, supporting the celebrated humanist scholars Angelo Poliziano and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Although the family's rule was arguably benevolent and enlightened, it was nevertheless effectively a dictatorship: despite republican forms, Lorenzo ruled Florence as he pleased from 1469 to his death on 8 April 1492.

The action of *Romola* moves from 9 April 1492, the day after the death of Lorenzo de' Medici, to 23 May 1498, the day on which Savonarola was publicly strangled and burnt for heresy. Between these two deaths, we see the French invasion of Italy in 1494 and Piero de' Medici's failed attempt of 1497 to re-establish his family's power in Florence. As a historical novel, *Romola* deals with the first years of republican government, under the leadership of the Dominican friar and prior of San Marco, Girolamo Savonarola, after sixty years of autocratic government by the Medici family. The Medici were later to return to power in 1512 and 1530.

Savonarola was Lorenzo's antithesis in every respect: whereas the former stood for popular government, the latter stood for autocracy; the former was the embodiment of medieval religious austerity, the latter the embodiment of Renaissance humanism; Lorenzo the autocrat paid poets to write, Savonarola the representative of the people burned books of his Bonfire of Vanities. All these aspects of the transition from Lorenzo's rule to Savonarola's are treated in great detail in *Romola*, yet the novel is, as its title suggests, the story primarily of its eponymous heroine, a fictional character painted large against a meticulously detailed historical backdrop.

In a letter of 1863 to R.H. Hutton, one of her most sensitive and perceptive reviewers, George Eliot emphasized the similarity between the central questions in the lives of *Romola* and Savonarola. The idea is explicitly expressed in the text itself: 'It flashed upon her mind that the problem before her was essentially the same as that which had lain before Savonarola – the problem where the sacredness of obedience ended, and where the sacredness of rebellion began' (*Romola*, p. 468). Taken on its own, however, this explains neither the Florentine Renaissance setting nor the double investigation of the problem, which is universal enough to have found expression closer to home in both space and time, and could have been explored in the story of a single protagonist. It is in difference rather than sameness that the historical setting and the parallel stories become meaningful.

Savonarola is a male historical figure, and his conflicts take place in the public sphere; *Romola* is a female fictional character, and the problems that beset her are in large part private. Had *Romola* been an actual Renaissance Florentine, her story would not have come to George Eliot and to us as has Savonarola's, because, as that of a woman acting in the private sphere, it would not have been recorded and preserved. On the other hand, George

Eliot's writing of *Romola* has in a sense placed Romola's story in history, albeit literary history. In the act of writing 'historical fiction' (the phrase itself is an oxymoron), George Eliot erodes the distinctions between 'history' and 'narrative'; by juxtaposing Romola with Savonarola, she both highlights their differences and dissolves them.

All this might be a needlessly complicated way of saying that *Romola* is a historical novel and as such falls into a tradition of British historical fiction beginning with Scott, who was a profound early influence on George Eliot. In that case, it would be a simple matter to introduce the Renaissance synthesis of classical and Christian cultures as another major theme of the novel. It is an idea that continues to interest George Eliot after the writing of *Romola* and finds its most succinct expression in Naumann's description of Dorothea in Chapter 19 of *Middlemarch*: '... antique form animated by Christian sentiment... sensuous force controlled by spiritual passion'. The medievalism of Scott, the Gothic novel, Romantic poetry, Pre-Raphaelite literature and art, and the late-medievalism of such historical novels as Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last of the Barons* (1843) and Charles Reade's *The Cloister and the Hearth* (1861), gave way to the high-Victorian fascination with the Renaissance, and here one would place *Romola* in a context of the works of Ruskin and Pater. Not wishing to be insular one would then widen the scope from British to world literature, and here Alessandro Manzoni's great historical novel would be of particular interest. George Eliot's use of purely historical chapters such as 'Florence Expects a Guest' interspersed with the fictional chapters is very like Manzoni's technique in *I promessi sposi* (George Eliot read the definitive Tuscan text shortly after it was published in 1840), and the similarities do not end there.

As is obvious by this point, I wish to maintain that George Eliot is interested in the history she is studying, but she is even more interested in the studying of history, which sheds some light on her choice of Renaissance Florence as the setting: Bardo and Baldassarre are both doing what George Eliot herself is doing – they are trying to revitalize the distant past. George Eliot has chosen the historical period most remarkable for its interest in history. To say that *Romola* is a novel about Renaissance Italy is to suggest in the author and betray in oneself a rather unproblematic sense of what 'history' is. Rather, *Romola* is a novel about the writing of novels like *Romola*; it brims with unspoken questions such as 'Why are we interested in history?', 'How do we know whether or not it is true?', 'Does its importance depend upon its literal factual truth?', and 'If not, what is the difference between history and literature?'

These are serious questions, yet George Eliot occasionally gives them a playful turn in which she highlights her own artifice, her intertwining of fiction and history, and at the same time puts history rather wittily in doubt. On two occasions, Tito, a fictional construct, is given credit for the deeds of historical characters. The first time is in Chapter 26, when Tito welcomes the French king. The historical record says that Francesco Gaddi made the speech. On the reflexive level – the level on which *Romola* is about the writing and reading of history and fiction – the scene dramatizes how the historical record could have been mistaken. On the surface level, meanwhile, the incident is used to further characterize Tito as likely to succeed because of his unassuming charm (that he 'let Gaddi have the credit', p. 237, serves both purposes). The same elegant trick is repeated later when, in Chapter 43, Tito brings the news that history attributes to Meo di Sasso (p. 382).

Like other historical novels before and after it – for example, Walter Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean* (1885)– *Romola* creates an entire network of correspondences between the time of its setting and that in which it is written. An early example of this is to be found in the Proem, when the Spirit expresses an interest in religious faith (as represented by the Frati) *versus* what the Victorians called ‘free thought’ (as represented by Lucretius and Luigi Pulci). Lucretius (99–55 BC), the Roman philosophical poet and author of *De rerum natura*, believed that the natural world was a product of evolution, not of divine creation, and that since death is simple annihilation it should not be feared. The reference to Lucretius, then, not only contributes to a faithful representation of Renaissance intellectual debate but also had contemporary resonances for *Romola*’s Victorian readership, since the novel appeared only three years after the publication of Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*.

The early Renaissance poet Luigi Pulci, meanwhile, is quoted several times in the course of the novel, and these evocations of his satirical secular outlook (together with references to Boccaccio’s *Decameron*) balance and offset the allusions – equally frequent in *Romola* – to Dante, the great medieval religious poet.

Another correspondence between the time of setting and the time of writing is the political scene in *Romola*. The early 1860s was a crucial moment in Italian history. As George Eliot was ‘industriously foraging – in old streets and old books’, the long-awaited unification of Italy was being accomplished. In 1860 Garibaldi conquered Sicily and Naples, and in 1861 Victor Emmanuel II became the first king of a united Italy, with Cavour as his prime minister. It was the end of a struggle that had fascinated British writers throughout the nineteenth century. For Byron, Shelley, and later for Swinburne, the republican struggle in Italy was symbolic of all movements for political freedom. In Victorian Britain, the campaign for electoral reform (which is central to George Eliot’s next two novels, *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*) was the most successful movement of this kind. For Victorian readers, then, there was an unspoken contemporary dimension to the story of Savonarola’s struggle for republican government, a triangle of correspondences between Renaissance Florence, nineteenth-century Italy, and Victorian Britain.

Finally, there is a correspondence in the status of women at the time of the setting and the time of the writing of *Romola*. For example, Tito’s power, as a husband, to dispose of the Bardi library, which the narrator unequivocally represents as Romola’s property, is an issue with an unmistakable Victorian resonance. The Married Women’s Property Acts, which were not passed until 1870 and 1882, were the culmination of a long struggle by Victorian feminists to secure legal protection for the incomes and property of married women, and the issue vibrates in the background of many nineteenth-century British novels, such as Jane Austen’s *Emma*, Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*. The more general question of Romola’s ‘place’ (which will be fully discussed later on) echoes Victorian debates about ‘woman’s place’, which are also central to the stories of Maggie Tulliver (*The Mill on the Floss*), Dorothea Brooke (*Middlemarch*), and Gwendolen Harleth (*Daniel Deronda*). As several commentators have observed, none of these heroines is permitted to find the answer that George Eliot found for herself; all these novels, in their discussions of ‘the Woman Question’, are fraught with the sense that each gain entails a loss, and this is encapsulated in the last, uncharacteristically simple, sentence of Chapter 37 of *Romola*: ‘She was free and alone.’

These and other nineteenth-century resonances led the critic Leslie Stephen (1832–1904) to the opinion that *Romola* was unconvincing as a historical novel, that in fact it was a novel very much about the time of its writing and only superficially about the time of its setting. He saw Romola herself as a positivist heroine, a fictional space for exemplifying the theories of Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Comte’s tripartite theory of history (polytheism, monotheism, and positivism) seems to be played out in Romola’s life. His Religion of Humanity – which sought to divorce the ethics and philosophy of Christianity from its mythical and miraculous elements, and preserve the former without the promise of heaven or the threat of hell – is more or less what Romola comes to in her maturity, when she abandons Savonarola’s dogma but retains what seems useful and right in his teaching. The novel itself is also tripartite, written in three books, as various critics have remarked, and the number three is used with almost occult insistence throughout the novel, but in this it follows the medieval tradition from which the Renaissance culture she describes was emerging. From this point of view, its tripartite structure has resonances with the past (Joachim di Fiore’s trinitarian theory of history, evoked in Chapter 1, and Dante’s three-part *Divine Comedy*) as well as in the future, which is the present of the novel’s production (Comtean positivism). In all three cases – Joachim di Fiore, Dante, Comte – the third phase is utopian – the Age of the Holy Spirit, Paradise, positivism – and this is also true of *Romola* itself.

There is a sense in which *Middlemarch*, set only forty years before the time of its writing, is a more convincing and successful historical novel than *Romola*, and this impression is based largely on the greater verisimilitude of the later novel. This, I think, is what Leslie Stephen finds lacking in *Romola*.

In some respects *Romola*’s lack of verisimilitude constitutes a genuine loss. This is particularly true of its language: it is a novel written in translation, in that its English is meant to have been spoken in Italian (this applies not only to the utterances of characters but also to the narrative discourse, which is often weighed down by the translation of Italian terms). George Eliot’s perfect ear for spoken idiom is thus disabled in the writing of this novel, because she is straining to ‘hear’ voices to which she has access only through written documents and, to make matters worse, she is then translating what she ‘hears’ into English.

In other respects, however, the lack of verisimilitude is palpably deliberate. In one of her earliest references to *Romola*, she called it ‘a historical romance’. The third and last book of the novel in particular claims ‘a certain latitude’ (the phrase is from Hawthorne’s definition of the romance as opposed to the novel in his preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*), and this is because it is seeking to express a utopian vision: parts of the last book of this historical novel are – on a symbolic level – paradoxically set outside time, in an ahistorical ideal realm in which justice is done and woman comes into her own.

Examples of romance triumphing over realism in the third book are not in short supply. The narrative has set up a plausible way in which Romola can discover Tito’s other family (Baldassarre has promised to show her), but George Eliot chooses instead to rely on the coincidence of Romola finding Lillo in Chapter 56. Similarly, despite the fact that the narrative has prepared uncomplicated ways for Baldassarre to find and kill Tito, in the event it relies on a coincidence bordering on the supernatural: in Chapter 67, Baldassarre is watching the river for floating food, but it brings him Tito (the object of his hunger for

revenge) instead. The coincidence is rendered even more incredible when Tito is cast ashore by the waters only two yards from Baldassarre. The chapter that follows this, 'Romola's Waking', completes the shift into a kind of transcendental symbolism not present in the first two books of the novel.

And this is where the utopian element enters. In 'Drifting Away' and 'Romola's Waking', Romola steps out of the history into which she has been painstakingly knitted during the earlier chapters. This stepping out of history is signalled by the use of Gostanza's story from Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1351) in 'Drifting Away', and the use of the plague, again evoking the *Decameron*, in 'Romola's Waking'. The symbolic implication is that woman cannot realize herself while trapped in the net of history, or, to resort to a feminist cliché, her story cannot unfold in the constriction of his-story.

Which brings us back to Savonarola. As I suggested earlier, the juxtaposition of their stories is the confrontation of historic man and hypothetical woman, the subject of history and the object of fiction. In 'Romola's Waking', the fictional heroine accomplishes literally and with ease what the historical protagonist desires but ultimately fails to do: to save 'this people'. Whereas in Savonarola's sermon in 'Inside the Duomo' the Israelites were metaphorical, the concerns otherworldly, and the 'saving' was of souls rather than bodies, in 'Romola's Waking' literal Jewish refugees are saved from death by the simple worldly action of the utopian heroine. Romola's concern with this world is again adumbrated by the evocation of the *Decameron*, perhaps the most thoroughly agnostic of early humanist writings. Nevertheless, her triumph is figured as sainthood, just as earlier her philanthropy was described in the chapter entitled 'The Visible Madonna' (as opposed to the preceding chapter 'The Unseen Madonna'). But whereas to modern readers this seems to contradict the reading of Romola's actions as agnostic humanism, to Victorian readers there was no such contradiction, precisely because the figuring of Romola as the 'Blessed Lady' or the 'Madonna' echoes the Comtean positivist notion of replacing supernatural objects of worship with their human equivalents, in particular the worship of the human mother and child (Romola carrying the Jewish baby) in place of the Madonna and the divine infant.

Perhaps the transcendental symbolism of the last book of *Romola* fails. Perhaps, as several commentators have found, 'Romola's Waking' is an embarrassment. But it is so because in it, as always, George Eliot is trying something new, straining the generous limits of what she can do, rather than repeating or refining her earlier accomplishments. She was always on the border, always attempting what was beyond her means or her historical moment.

There are other parts and aspects of *Romola*, however, that partake fully in the tradition of historical realism. Her treatment of Machiavelli, for example, is faithful to her understanding of the historical figure and the implications of his work. *The Prince*, infamous for its dictum 'the end justifies the means', scandalized generations of readers who took it as a sincere statement of amoral personal belief and damned the author with his book (the English word 'machiavellian' is defined as 'elaborately cunning or deceitful'). In her cameo portrait of Machiavelli, George Eliot joins Spinoza and Rousseau, both of whom she greatly admired, in interpreting *The Prince* not as a theoretical justification of amoral political practice but rather as a pessimistic description of an inevitable state of affairs in which the unscrupulous are more likely to succeed in any struggle for power. Tito's rise parallels and exemplifies this:

only when the transcendental symbolic third phase of the novel takes over is Tito's rise thwarted by a just nemesis, and the novel shifts to romance. In this context of realism *versus* romance, the ending of Chapter 67, in which Tito dies, is particularly interesting. After the extravagant coincidences, the intimations of supernatural intervention in Tito's fate, the narrator declares her agnosticism, but at the same time describes human desires that history and reality cannot accommodate, desires that can find their fulfilment only in the imaginative world of romance: 'Justice is like the Kingdom of God – it is not without us as a fact, it is within us as a great yearning.'

(ii) *Potency and the Word*

Having quoted the passage in Chapter 38, 'The Black Marks Become Magical', where Baldassarre suddenly regains his memory and access to the Greek letters before him, R.H. Hutton, in *The Saturday Review*, made the following observations:

This passage, taken with those which lead up to it, whether they refer to Bardo or Baldassarre, has the effect of reproducing one great feature in the age of the revival of learning with the finest effect – the sense of large *human* power which the mastery over a great ancient language, itself the key to a magnificent literature, gave, and which made scholarship then a *passion*, while with us it has almost relapsed into an antiquarian dry-as-dust pursuit. We realize again, in reading about Bardo and Baldassarre, how, for these times, the first sentence of St John, 'In the beginning was the Word', had regained all its force, to the exclusion, perhaps, of the further assertion that the Word was with God and was God.
(Carroll, 1971, p. 201)

I find this one of the most trenchant and eloquent passages in *Romola* criticism. Here Hutton sees the centrality of reading, writing, and speech in the novel – language itself replacing God as the object of reverence.

Names! Images! – his mind rushed through its wealth without pausing, like one who enters on a great inheritance.
(p. 335)

He saw a name, and the images of deeds rose with it: he saw the mention of a deed, and he linked it with a name.
(p. 336)

'Human power' and 'passion' are vividly realized in the braiding together of signifier, signified, and referent: the sense of communion in the act of reading.

Yet both the characters Hutton cites, Bardo and Baldassarre, end their lives in bitterness and dissatisfaction because they are denied the fruits of their learning; their learning, at any rate, has not enabled them to find tranquillity and has disabled them in the realm of human interaction. Both are surrounded by a complex of metaphors equating 'sight' and 'insight'. Bardo is literally blind, and the castration symbolism of blindness is brought close to the surface when Piero di Cosimo paints Bardo as Oedipus. Baldassarre's loss of memory, meanwhile, is 'as of a man suddenly smitten with blindness' (p. 267), and here again the loss is figured as sexual dysfunction, in this case impotence: Baldassarre's knife snapping against Tito's impenetrable armour in Chapter 34 foreshadows his public failure to decipher Greek and thereby condemn Tito in the Rucellai Gardens (Chapter 39).

The sense of human power and passion in the command of language is strikingly present in *Romola*, but equally present is the suggestion that language is not easy to command and often militates against the desires of the human subject. In Chapter 5, Bardo says to Romola, 'Have I forgotten thy fainting in the mere search for the references I needed to explain a single passage of Callimachus?' Callimachus was a poet and scholar of the third century BC credited with 800 volumes of which only fragments survive. He believed that epic was an outdated form and is famous for his dictum 'A big book is a big evil.' The chapter is dominated by Bardo's disparagement of his daughter's fitness for scholarship because of her sex (an echo of a similar early father/daughter scene in *The Mill on the Floss*). The fact behind the fiction 'George Eliot' would seem to be a refutation of Bardo's position even as he utters it: the fictional male scholar with all his learning was conceived in the mind of an actual female scholar (and her impressive command of the Renaissance intellectual scene vibrates in his every pedantic utterance). Nevertheless the implied author sends this signal to the reader over Bardo's shoulder, so to speak, at the outset of what is in several senses a 'big book'.

Jim Reilly has remarked that Dino's vision, in which 'instead of water' he sees 'written parchment unrolling itself everywhere' (p. 157), might reflect Romola's initial situation, but as a prophecy of the future it suggests nothing so much as the writing of *Romola* itself. Perhaps Nello's assertion that 'authorship is a narrowing business' (p. 35) is only half a joke.

Baldassarre in particular is a creature racked by language. He is a mosaic of intertextual references, which taken together suggest a lonely, tormented, impotent, and violent masculinity. Overcome by the power of Savonarola's words at the end of Chapter 24, he is seen as a self-crucified Christ ('Baldassarre clutched his own palms, driving his long nails into them...'). In his struggle to come to terms with language, poring over inscrutable text in the outhouse, he evokes Frankenstein's monster. The imaging of his loss of memory as blindness at times recalls 'Samson Agonistes', at others Gloucester in *King Lear*. Betrayed by his child, he echoes Gloucester again and Lear himself in his final madness. Baldassarre's appearance in 'A Supper at the Rucellai Gardens' is redolent of the similar intrusion of Banquo's ghost, and there are other *Macbeth* allusions in *Romola* to support this: we are told of Tito that 'it was as if she had seen him committing a murder, and had had a diseased impression ever after that his hands were covered with fresh blood' (p. 479), but the murder in question is in fact the verbal denial of Baldassarre. In Baldassarre's hatred of Tito, there are echoes of Dante's *Inferno*, especially the idea of *contrapasso*, in which the eternal punishment bears a poetic relation of affinity or inversion to the sin in question. Tito's sin was his failure to reciprocate Baldassarre's love, and in the final scene between them, Tito fears that 'death might mean this chill gloom with the face hanging over him for ever', while Baldassarre longs for the Dantean hell: 'then he would desire to die with his hold on this body, and follow the traitor to hell that he might clutch him there'.

The homoerotic overtones of their final embrace (a variation on the embrace-in-death of Maggie and Tom at the end of *The Mill on the Floss*) has been prepared for throughout the treatment of Baldassarre. In Chapter 30, for example, his vengeful thoughts are threaded through with a barely veiled frustrated homosexual desire:

I was a loving fool... Fool! men love their own delights; there is no delight to be had in me. I wish I may see him lie with those red lips white and dry as ashes... that eternity of

vengeance where [Baldassarre], an undying hate, might clutch for ever an undying traitor, and hear that fair smiling hardness cry and moan with anguish... This despised body, which was to be the instrument of a sublime vengeance...

At other points Baldassarre is seen through feminine metaphors: as a mother, as a maenad, and finally as a woman watching 'on the headland for the ship which held something dear' (1543).

This crossing of gender borders is not limited to Baldassarre. Savonarola is also figured as a mother – 'But let me see the fruit of my travail.' His 'travail' is a matter of speech and writing, of seeking to convey the Word through the strength of his own linguistic power, and he too is eventually frustrated. Many critics have remarked that Tito (like Stephen Guest of *The Mill on the Floss*, Will Ladislaw of *Middlemarch*, and Daniel Deronda) is a curiously feminine male character. The marital arguments between Romola and Tito are an odd anticipation and reversal of those between Lydgate and Rosamond in *Middlemarch*. The armour that Tito wears to protect himself from Baldassarre becomes symbolic, in the scenes between Tito and Romola, of his new frigidity towards her (the word 'cool' is used of him repeatedly in this context), and that alienation, that cooling, becomes explicit between them a few days after his purchase of the armour, when he sells the Bardi library.

Throughout the novel, gender, sexuality, reading, and writing are intertwined, and this, to return to the quotation which began this section, is what is missing from Hutton's insight. His many brilliant reviews of George Eliot's work make little comment on the gender of the novelist, and that no doubt increased her satisfaction with his response: she wished to be judged as an author, not as an authoress.

Nevertheless, if we reread his comments in the light of her gender, certain tensions arise that are elided in his reading. His use of 'us' ('while with us it has almost relapsed into an antiquarian dry-as-dust pursuit') makes sense only for Victorian men. For women the acquisition of learning and especially of classical learning was transgressive, threatening the borders of gender definition, revealing an Eve-like desire for the forbidden knowledge, not least the sexual knowledge, that flourished in Latin and Greek literature but was excised from literature in English.

The intersection of the issues of gender and learning and the question of the reconcilability of passion and scholarship are persistent undercurrents of *Romola*. Even the moral questions ostensibly at the centre of the novel are linked to this reflexive undertow. 'Where the sacredness of obedience ended, and the sacredness of rebellion began' is a fitting concern for the novel in which George Eliot claims for the first time more than the wisdom of the country parson: here she assumes the authority of a first-rank intellectual with a global and historical overview. And it wounds her – as a woman ('I started it a young woman and finished it an old one'), as a novelist (few critics would deny that *Middlemarch* – and some might argue that *Silas Marner* – is a greater creative success than *Romola*), and as an intellectual (in seeking to vindicate a woman's right to scholarship, she risks transforming her own passion for learning into a 'dry-as-dust pursuit', as witness certain pedantic footnotes).

On two occasions George Eliot claimed herself as the 'original' of the desiccated scholar Edward Casaubon of *Middlemarch*, and in doing so she, like Hutton, elides the issue of the gender of the scholar when looking at the scholarly personality. Nevertheless, Marian Evans

Lewes was an Eve who took on the Adamic function of the naming of creation (and began by renaming herself 'George'). A scholar and a novelist must obliterate the self, but the Victorian woman who assumed these roles brought many facets of her self into question: her capacity and her right on the one hand – her femininity and class identity on the other. Reading the classics and claiming authority were neither 'feminine' nor 'ladylike'.

(iii) *Displacing the Father*

Below the explicit historical, aesthetic, philosophical, and ethical concerns of this complex novel there runs a subliminal thread of variegated response to the question of Romola's 'place' in contrast with that of the father. *Romola*, unlike George Eliot's other novels, is full of fathers, and these fathers are symbolically linked in such a way as to form a composite identity. Bardo, Bernardo, and Baldassarre echo each other as names and as characters: Bardo's name is included in Bernardo's just as the name of his relation to Romola (father) is included in Bernardo's (godfather); Baldassarre, like Bardo, is a scholar, deserted by his son; Baldassarre tells Romola, 'You would have been my daughter!', and Bernardo, a few pages later, tells her, 'I am your father'; and the alliterated 'B' of their names is echoed again in the Florentine 'Babbo' (the equivalent of 'Daddy') which is used in reference to Tito. Bardo is Romola's father in nature, Bernardo her father in the Church, Baldassarre her father-in-law. Savonarola, meanwhile, is her spiritual and intellectual father. The way to conversion for Romola is opened by her impulse to call Savonarola 'Father'.

Romola spends most of the novel in anxiety on behalf of one or other of the male authority figures around her, but from the moment she discovers that Tito has sold the Bardo library, there is an increasingly insistent subtext in which Romola abandons her place and eventually assumes that of the male authority figure. Just before the crucial moment of alienation between Romola and Tito, her place in relation to his is emphasized: 'There was a low stool against Tito's chair, and that was Romola's habitual seat when they were talking together' (p. 280). But after he has told her that he has sold the library, she 'stood up looking down at him' (p. 285). By the end of the novel, Romola is in Tito's place, and Bardo, Bernardo, Baldassarre, Savonarola, and Tito are all dead.

This throws some light on the fatherless family that forms a tableau at the end of the novel. In her earlier visit to Tessa's house, Romola's eventual displacement of the father (Tito) is foreshadowed:

She sat down in Tito's chair, and put out her arms towards the lad, whose eyes had followed her. He hesitated: and, pointing his small fingers at her with a half-puzzled, half-angry feeling, said, 'That's Babbo's chair', not seeing his way out of the difficulty if Babbo came and found Romola in his place. (p. 463)

The last phrase stands in opposition to Savonarola's command during their first meeting on the road out of Florence ('Come, my daughter, come back to your place!') and the title of Chapter 42.

In the Epilogue, Romola's displacement of Tito has become permanent. She has taken over not only the literal armchair but also the didactic role that has been represented as a part of fatherhood throughout the novel: she is teaching Tito's son Lillo (Tito's daughter Ninna,

meanwhile, as Deirdre David has pointed out, is flower-arranging in the corner). In a comic-grotesque reversal of the male–high, female–low structure that has dominated the novel, Lillo ‘shuffled along the floor, still keeping the book on his lap, till he got close to her and lodged his chin on her knee’ (p. 581).

In closing, I would like to look back from this last image of Romola to her introduction in Chapter 5. We first come across her reading aloud to her father. The text is Politian’s *Miscellanea*, and the subject is the story of how Teiresias came to be blinded. Politian’s source is Callimachus, but there is an alternative account, used by Ovid, that is very different. In it Teiresias saw two snakes mating; he struck them with his staff and was transformed into a woman. Seven years later he saw the snakes again, struck them, and was turned back into a man. Later, Zeus and Hera were disputing who receives greater pleasure from the sexual act: man or woman. Teiresias was called in to resolve the dispute, being the only person with experience on both sides. He decided in favour of woman and was blinded by an infuriated Hera. Zeus granted Teiresias longevity and the gift of prophecy as compensation.

Ovid’s version is the one that Dante uses (*Inferno* XX). In nineteenth-century British literature, the former version was favoured over the latter. Tennyson and (more surprisingly) Swinburne, for example, both use Callimachus as their source in poems about Teiresias.

Teiresias also sets in motion the action of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*: he knows that the pollution in Thebes emanates from Oedipus himself, and it is to prove him wrong that Oedipus begins his search for the truth.

George Eliot was familiar with all these texts. It seems to me that in the untold story (which is nevertheless evoked by the reciting of the Callimachus version) all the subliminal elements we have seen in *Romola* are featured in miniature: the castration symbolism of blinding; linguistic fluency (in this case prophecy) as linked with or opposed to sexual potency; and above all the crossing of gender boundaries. The untold Teiresias is the George Eliot figure, the male/female voice, of the beginning of the novel; Romola herself is the George Eliot figure of its close, and in these two signatures the implied author indicates the complicated road to making sense of her most intensely intertextual and reflexive novel.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

The copy-text for the present edition is the Cabinet edition of *Romola* (2 volumes, Edinburgh and London, Blackwood, 1878). It has been checked against the manuscript in the British Library (Add. MSS 34,027–9) and the original *Cornhill Magazine* version published in fourteen monthly parts (1862–3). Occasionally I have preferred the earlier readings to that of the copy-text, and those changes are listed at the end of this volume as ‘Emendations to the Copy-text’; other differences of wording between the *Cornhill* and Cabinet versions are listed as ‘Substantive Variants’.

I would like to acknowledge my debt to the Clarendon *Romola*, edited by Andrew Brown (Oxford, 1993). It was in constant consultation with the Clarendon *Romola* that I decided upon the changes to make to the copy-text for this new Penguin Classics edition. My final decisions have not always been identical with those of the Clarendon editor, but they have been made on the basis of his careful research and argumentation.

The major differences are as follows. I have italicized Latin and Italian words and phrases more often than does the Clarendon editor, for clarity, consistency, and ease of reading; the manuscript is so chaotic in this respect that a careful attempt to recognize some system seems misplaced, and it is likely that George Eliot expected authoritative editorial interference. Capitals have been removed wherever possible because they give a greater emphasis for modern readers than for the Victorians at whom they were aimed. I leave the capitals in most instances where George Eliot herself has changed lower to upper case in the proofs (she usually does this in the interest of irony or in deference to the emphasis that would be given by the character under discussion). Thus I have chosen ‘piazza’ and ‘divine’ but ‘In moments of ecstatic contemplation, doubtless, the sense of self melted in the sense of the Unspeakable Modes of address such as ‘Father’, ‘Godfather’, ‘Madonna’, and ‘Cousin’ have been capitalized throughout. Inconsistent spellings and small scholarly errors have been silently corrected (for example, ‘Signory’ has been changed to ‘Signoria’, ‘Knights Templars’ to ‘Knights Templar’, and the spellings of some Italian names have been corrected). I have modernized the spelling of Italian names for ease of reference in encyclopedias, etc. George Eliot’s ‘father-in-law’ has been replaced with the modern ‘stepfather’ throughout for ease of comprehension; otherwise the text follows that of the Cabinet edition, apart from a few modernized spellings (today, tomorrow, towards, midday, upstairs, downstairs).

I have retained the paragraphing and punctuation of the Cabinet edition, which, while clearly not George Eliot’s own, was approved by her; single quotation marks have been substituted for double ones.

CHRONOLOGY

- 1871–2 *Middlemarch* published in eight parts.
- 1874 *The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems*.
- 1876 *Daniel Deronda*, published in eight parts. Purchases The Heights in Witley, Surrey.
- 1878 30 November, Lewes dies.
- 1879 Preparing last volume of Lewes's *Problems of Life and Mind* for publication. *The Impressions of Theophrastus Such*.
- 1880 6 May, marries John Walter Cross. 22 December, dies in London.
- 1819 22 November, born at Arbury, Warwickshire.
- 1824–36 Attends boarding schools in Attleborough, Nuneaton and Coventry.
- 1836 3 February, mother dies.
- 1837 After sister Christiana marries, becomes father's housekeeper.
- 1841 Moves with her father to Coventry where she meets Charles and Caroline ('Cara') Bray. Reads Charles Hennell's *An Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* (1838), which leads her to question her religious faith.
- 1842 January-May, the 'Holy War' with her father when she refuses to attend church. Beginning of friendship with Charles Hennell and his sister Sara.
- 1844 Begins a translation of Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (4th edn., 1840). 1846 *The Life of Jesus* published.
- 1846–7 'Poetry and Prose, from the Notebook of an Eccentric', published in the Coventry *Herald and Observer*. 1847–8 Nurses father.
- 1849 Begins to translate Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. 31 May, death of father. June sets off for France, Italy and Switzerland with the Brays; they return to England in July. Remains in Geneva, lodging from October, with the painter M. D'Albert-Durade and his wife. Begins journal.
- 1850 March, returns to England. Feels unwanted by her family and resides with the Brays. Decides to earn her living by writing. October, visits John Chapman in London.
- 1851 January, her first major article, 'The Progress of the Intellect', published in the *Westminster Review*. September, moves to London and becomes assistant editor of the *Westminster*.
- 1852 January, her first number of the *Westminster* published. Close friendship with Herbert Spencer.
- 1853 Working hard on the *Westminster*. October, intimacy with George Henry Lewes begins.
- 1854 July, translation of Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* published. Leaves for Germany with Lewes. Begins translation of Spinoza's *Ethics*.
- 1855 March, returns to England with Lewes, and they set up house together.
- 1856 Trips to Ilfracombe and Tenby to collect materials for Lewes's *Sea-side Studies*

(18J8).Begins to write fiction, 'The Sad Fortunes of Amos Barton'. 'The Natural History of German Life' and 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', published in the *Westminster*.

- 1857** 'Amos Barton', 'Mr Gilfil's Love-Story' and 'Janet's Repentance', published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. Assumes pseudonym, George Eliot. Writes to her brother of her relationship with Lewes and he breaks off communication. *October*, begins *Adam Bede*.
- 1858** *January*, *Scenes of Clerical Life*. Travels with Lewes to Munich, then to Dresden via Salzburg, Vienna and Prague.
- 1859** *February*, *Adam Bede*. *April*, interrupts composition of *The Mill on the Floss* to write 'The Lifted Veil', published in *Blackwood's* in *July*. *June*, pressured into unveiling the identity of 'George Eliot'.
- 1860** *April*, *The Mill on the Floss*. Trip to Italy where she conceives the idea of *Romola*. *August*, writes 'Brother Jacob'. Begins *Silas Marner*.
- 1861** *April*, *Silas Marner*. Further trip to Italy for research on *Romola*, which she starts to write in *October*.
- 1862** *July*, *Romola* begins serialization in *Cornhill Magazine*.
- 1863** *July*, *Romola*. She and Lewes buy the Priory, Regent's Park.
- 1864** Begins verse play *The Spanish Gypsy*. *July*, 'Brother Jacob', published in the *Cornhill*.
- 1865** *February*, temporarily abandons her verse play which is making her ill. *March*, starts writing *Felix Holt*.
- 1866** *June*, *Felix Holt*. Returns to work on *The Spanish Gypsy*.
- 1867** Trip to Spain to collect material. Subscribes £50 to the foundation of Girton College, Cambridge.
- 1868** *May*, *The Spanish Gypsy*.
- 1869** Writes 'Brother and Sister' sonnets, and begins *Middlemarch*.
- 1870** 'The Legend of Uta', published in *Macmillan's Magazine*.
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