

Romola: the Emerging Female Self in Renaissance Florence

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Abstract In *Romola* (1862) George Eliot investigates the complex interplay between the female self and the surrounding cultural stifling milieu to explore the limitations and possibilities of femininity in Renaissance Florence. The author vests the eponymous heroine with an urgent desire to overthrow the socio-political structures founded on male patriarchal values, dominant in Florence and unfitting to accommodate women's talents, thus echoing the debate about women's place in mid-Victorian androcentric society. Romola's aspiration to moral freedom, a vocation alternative to marriage and childbearing, and to an intellectual autonomy unmolested by a long-established patriarchal system, is crushed by the burden of family traditions, past obligations and social responsibilities. The purpose of this paper is twofold: to examine the evolution of the heroine's character through her spiritual journey (which echoes Eliot's own religious struggle) and to show her triumph over the egotism inherited from patriarchal figures by emerging into the self-denial which lies at the heart of Eliot's agnostic ethical humanism. Entangled in the universal conflict between individual desire and moral responsibility, Romola stands as an intellectual woman capable to find a balance between dutiful obedience and resistance to the rigid morality outlined by the male social code, thus attaining her autonomous female identity as a fully-individualized human being, and not as a merely 'Other' in relation to men.

Keywords George Eliot. Desire. Responsibility. Humanism.

While reading about Savonarola it occurred to me that his life and times afford fine material for an historical romance [...] a subject which will fall in with much of [Eliot's] studies and sympathies.

(*The George Eliot Letters*, 3, 295)

It is in the journal of George Eliot's beloved companion George Henry Lewes, in the days of the couple's first trip to Florence in 1860, that the 'germ' of her Italian novel *Romola* (1862-63) can be found. Eliot's deep interest in Italian culture led her to carry much detailed research into Florentine customs, culture and language and to go through an exhausting labour of historical reconstruction in order to write her Italian novel. In her diary she observes that this novel marked a transition in her life: "I began it a young woman – I finished it an old woman" (cf. Ashton 2013, 256). Eliot was driven by a strong desire – as her contemporary Henry James (1885) termed it – to "neglec[t] nothing that would enable her to live, *intellectually*, in the period she had undertaken to describe" (1971, 500; italics)

added). The causes which prompted Eliot to venture to Italy, beyond the boundaries of her childhood English Midlands countryside of her early fiction, and to give detailed reconstructions of Florentine life, were both psychological and historical, as the principle at work in *Romola* is: "to strive after as full a vision of the medium in which a character moves as of the character itself" (*The George Eliot Letters*, hereinafter *GEL*, 4, 96). In order to voice her plea for an equal participation of men and women in shaping society and its cultural development, Eliot investigates the complex interplay between the female self and the stifling milieu, thus echoing the debate about women and their place in mid-Victorian androcentric society, which seemed unfitting to accommodate women's talents and desire for a vocation alternative to marriage and childbearing. The conflict *Romola* experiences looking for a balance - or even a compromise - between her individual yearnings and outward conditions, has many points of resemblance also with the struggle Eliot experienced herself as an intellectual woman in Victorian England. Indeed, the strong desire for self-assertion hindered by an impulse to self-denial, characterizes *Romola* as it did her creator. At Eliot's time, John Stuart Mill identified these two components as essential in his ideal of self-development. In his philosophical work *On Liberty* (1869), he contrasted Pagan self-fulfilment against the Christian ideal of self-denial, arguing that the latter is as important as the former in the individual's attempt to find a balance between personal freedom and the necessary acceptance of the rules of society. Verging on the boundary between selflessness and selfishness, *Romola* is pitted against authoritarian and patriarchal figures against whom she proves capable of rebellion without stifling her generous impulse to unselfishness.

In the attempt to read *Romola* as a *Bildungsroman*, this essay will investigate the three main stages of the heroine's personal development: *Romola*'s daughterly devotion first, her enthusiastic commitment to the duties imposed by Christian humanity then, and her final sympathetic morality as a stepmother and a Madonna. In *Romola*'s *Bildung* the apparently irreconcilable opposites - to be at once dutiful and unconventional - seem to find an harmonization in the final triumph of her capacity for 'fellow-feeling', as the best means for women to triumph over men's egotism, avoiding both the unfeelingness of utter self-assertion and the passivity of utter self-denial. In this sense, the ending of *Romola* inaugurates Eliot's mature elaboration of the centrality of sympathy in both her ethics and aesthetics in *Middlemarch*.

In Book V of George Eliot's *The Mill of the Floss* (1860) the heroine Maggie Tulliver, longing for intellectual autonomy, is offered Madame de Staël's book *Corinne, or Italy* (1807). Despite not being able to resist the temptation of the pleasure that reading affords her, she does not want to finish the novel because she foresees that the talented Anglo-Italian poetess Corinne is going to be overcome by the fair and light-complexioned

lady, Lucile. Through Maggie's refusal to witness Corinne's wreck, Eliot is underlining how marriage and motherhood alone are inadequate outlets for women's intellect and ardour, although they seem to be the only possibilities available to them in Victorian England. Indeed, Eliot's contemporary society was dominated by a sort of male cultural authority which seemed incompatible with female intellectual ambitions and desire for intellectual autonomy. This distorted, yet widely held view claimed reason as male and emotion as female, whereby masculinity was to be associated with genius and femininity with the liabilities of the female body. In this perspective, and contrary to Maggie's feelings, as Ellen Moers' *Literary Women* puts it, *Corinne* was instead "the book of the woman of genius" (1976, 173), as within this novel the eponymous heroine discovers that in early nineteenth-century Italy a woman had far more freedom to perform in public and devote herself to the arts than in England. This greater freedom of action is proved by Corinne's success as a passionate lover and a performing artist, as well as by her personal and artistic boldness in displaying herself in public to receive the applause of an ecstatic crowd when she is crowned as a national genius at the Capitol in Rome, thus celebrating the rights of intellectual freedom for women. Her public triumph, transgressing all rules established for female behaviour, validates the possibility for a talented woman to assert her female identity as a fully-individualized human being, not merely as a submissive 'Other' in relation to man.

Eliot knew of some Italian women having successful public careers, as she noted in her early meditation on "womanly intellect" entitled *Woman in France: Madame de Sablé* (1854): "we confess ourselves unacquainted with the productions of those awful women of Italy, who held professional chairs, and were great in civil and canon law" (1990, 9). And so it was not surprising that it was precisely to Italy - one of the countries where eminent Victorians travelled to during their nineteenth-century middle-class version of the Grand Tour to cultivate their minds - that Eliot shifted in *Romola*. The rise and fall of Girolamo Savonarola's popular religious party shapes the historical plot of the novel, following the downfall and expulsion of the secular Medici family from Florence in 1492 and the expedition led by King Charles VIII of France entering the city in triumph. George Eliot's "treatment of Florentine politics reflects Victorian political apprehensions" (Robinson 1962, 34), caused mainly by the pressure to adjust to the economic, social and demographic changes unleashed by the industrial revolution, as well as by the increasing conflict between different emerging social classes. But *Romola* is particularly hinged on the peculiar opposition between the "ardent public man" (Ashton 2011, 836) and the "ardent private woman": while the first is driven by an aspiration to political leadership, or at least to an advancement in politics, the second is completely excluded from political life. Through the male hero of the novel, Tito Melema, the author explores how political events

affect the development of an individual's nature as, in order to become a valued member of the Florentine society – as a translator, secretary, ambassador and double agent working impartially for both the Mediceans and the supporters of Savonarola – he will be led to deny part of his past. Never, instead, is the female heroine directly involved in political activities, neither granted the possibility to give her opinion on political issues, nor to give her contribution to the political events upsetting the Republic of Florence. In accordance with the commonplace division between male and female space, Romola's confinement to the private sphere of domesticity undoubtedly reflected Eliot's own refusal to support any political causes, which in itself was a token of her belief that a woman's "incalculably diffusive" (838) influence in society ought to be limited to morals, rather than extended to politics. Yet, with respect to the 'Woman Question' – as the confused thoughts on the subject of women were labelled by the Victorian ruling middle classes – *Romola* explores the eponymous heroine's endeavour to define 'her place' (ch. 42, book III, is entitled "Romola in Her Place") as an intellectual woman in Renaissance Florence, challenging the power of the numerous male figures surrounding her and the obligations of a long-established patriarchal system. Romola's painful struggle for autonomy is hindered not only by her husband Tito Melema, but also by the many father-figures present in her life, namely her natural father Bardo de' Bardi, her godfather Bernardo Del Nero and her spiritual father Girolamo Savonarola. All these patriarchal figures will be dead by the end of the novel and Romola will be left with no 'traditional patriarchal authority', eventually assuming full authority, first as a Madonna ministering a community of plague-stricken villagers, then as the leading matriarch of an all-female household. But this is only the end of a very new beginning.

The main concern of the first part of *Romola* is with a woman's responsibility and duty to her father, and broadly to male figures. Described as a "pre-Raphaelite Madonna", since the very beginning Romola is presented as the dutiful daughter of her learned father, the commanding figure of patriarchal authority who has been ruling her life so far. By blind Bardo De' Bardi, whose scholarly ambitions are unfulfilled, she is raised as a humanist and for him she acts as an amanuensis, submissively assisting him in classical studies. Therefore, confined within the walls of his library, Romola attempts to give meaning to her life through passive filial obedience and piety for her father. Her dedication to Bardo's needs – which cannot but remind the readers of Marian Evans's taking care of her ageing father Robert in the 1840s – partly compensates also for the loss of her mother in early childhood, a painful loss her creator had experienced too. Romola's moving devotion stands in stark contrast with the egotism characterizing all other male characters in the novel. While her brother Dino's stern spirituality has led him to desert Bardo and reject scholarly life for a monastery of Dominican friars (thus becoming Fra Luca, a zealous

devotee of Savonarola's), her husband Tito will betray both his father and father-in-law in his attempt to advance in Florentine society.

Precisely because she is 'merely' a woman, Romola has been confined to the office of a secretary transmitting male texts. Despite Bardo's recognition and admiration of her "wide-glancing" intelligence and intellectual industry – notably, she is praised as being "endowed beyond the measure of women" (Barrett 1996, 69) – Bardo remarks that his daughter has been anyhow assigned by Nature to a "lower category". This narrow-minded assumption inevitably leads him to underrate his daughter's intellectual capacities and power of application, and to reproach the lack of accuracy in her memory. Romola's sense of intellectual inferiority to men is further heightened by the comparison her father frequently makes between her capacities and her brother Dino's scholarship, in whose shadow she has grown up. Therefore, Romola realizes she is "by no means sufficient to [her] father" (68), persuaded by his depreciative remarks that she is not gifted with the qualities indispensable for scholarship traditionally ascribed to men. After all, Bardo observes, "the unbeaten paths of knowledge are still less reconcilable with the wandering, vagrant propensity of the feminine mind than with the feeble powers of the feminine body" (51). Yet, it is only within the walls of her father's library that Romola can show herself as an intelligent and educated woman, since for women the acquisition of learning was transgressive according to society, as it threatened the borders of gender definition. Thus, the only feminist cause Eliot seemed to support in *Romola* was precisely the educational cause, which she had already addressed especially in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), deploring girls' narrow educational opportunities in Victorian England as a source of misery.

As Shona Simpson (1998) observed, if Romola's confinement at Bardo's library in Florence is an oppressive "prison", it also serves as a protective 'cradle' for the heroine. The enclosed spaces of her house protect her from "the debasing influence of [her] sex", "with their sparrow-like frivolity and their enslaving superstition" (54) which her father has been careful to keep her away from. The precious books and antiquities ranged in perfect order on the shelves of Bardo's spacious library also provide the heroine with a reliable source of knowledge, allowing her to expand her intellect and ennoble her mind. On the other hand, this life of cloistered knowledge and scholarly seclusion seems to oppress the heroine, who longs for escaping the domestic walls: "this proud pale face [...] was in a state of girlish simplicity and ignorance concerning the world outside her father's books" (58).

Romola is not only a dutiful daughter, but also an obedient wife, as the first volume unfolds her happy encounter and marriage with Tito Melema, an Italianate-Greek scholar who has suffered shipwreck after deserting his father Baldassarre Calvo. When Romola's impoverished father expresses

his wish to “find a fitting *parentado*” (Barrett 1996, 54) for her, she objects to the prospect of getting married soon, rather promising that she will study diligently so that “perhaps some great scholar will want to marry me [...] and he will be to you [Bardo] in place of my brother [...] and you will not be sorry that I was your daughter” (54). Yet, when Tito is first introduced at the Bardi library, his visit is welcomed with a sparkle of joy and hope in Romola’s face, and even a smile and pink flush rise to her usually pale cheeks:

it seemed like a wreath of spring, dropped suddenly into Romola’s young but wintry life, which had inherited nothing but memories – memories of a dead mother, of a lost brother, of a blind father’s happier time – memories of far-off light, love, and beauty, that lay embedded in dark mines of books. (59)

A new close comradeship develops and quickly evolves into deep mutual affection, as the Greek youth suddenly falls in love with the majestic beauty of Bardo’s daughter, whom he compares to a “great nature-goddess”. At first he even paradoxically feels in subjection to her simplicity, experiencing “that loving awe in the presence of noble womanhood” (9). Tito’s youthful beauty and scholarly attitude win him not only Romola’s affection, but also her father’s respect, as Bardo charges him with the task of translating some old manuscripts and help him to clear off his debts. So, it is Tito who takes the role of carrying on Bardo’s work Dino was appointed to perform for him. At Easter time, with the blind scholar’s consent, the two young protagonists are married in a union compared by the narrator to Bacchus’ mythical crowning of Ariadne’s poor life.

Marriage – Eliot claims in the *Finale* of *Middlemarch* – is “the beginning of the home epic, the gradual conquest or irremediable loss of that complete union” (Ashton 2011, 168) represented by Adam and Eve. Tito’s marriage to Romola begins as a union of hope, yet it ends in despair and conflict. The failure of their wedding is anticipated by Fra Luca’s premonitory vision, foretelling a marriage between Romola and a mysterious stranger – in such terms is Tito introduced in Book I – who will bring pain to her and her father. In spite of his attempt to warn his sister “against marriage as a temptation of the enemy” (Barrett 1996, 158), Dino fails to persuade Romola not to marry Tito. As foreshadowed by Fra Luca’s fantasy, Tito egoistically tries to maintain control over Romola’s feelings and actions by appealing to his commanding role of husband and master. After Bardo’s death, he plans to sell his distinguished library to the invading French as, having betrayed his foster father and being embroiled in devious political intrigues, he wishes to leave Florence. By selling Bardo’s ancient library without his wife’s consent, Tito betrays both his father-in-law and Romola, who then realizes the true overbearing nature of her

husband's character. Moreover, Tito encourages his wife to be passive and wants absolute control over Romola, who soon becomes "careful to suppress all those promptings that seemed to isolate her from him [...] labouring, as a loving woman must, to *subdue* her nature to her husband's" (247; italics added). Tito exerts his powerful male authority also on the other main female character in the novel, Tessa, a witless milkmaid with whom he has gone through a "mock marriage", thus being compelled to take charge of her two illegitimate children, Lillo and Ninna. While Romola is forcibly expelled from the suffocating oppressiveness of Bardo's library to be relegated to the painted chambers of Tito's house, Tessa is forbidden to go out without Tito's permission. Nevertheless, as soon as Romola discovers the treachery of her Greek husband and his dereliction of duty, she accuses him of never being open with her. Feeling that she cannot remain in subjection to the mind of a selfish and faithless husband any longer, she proves bold enough to break the marriage contract by leaving Tito, holding him unworthy of her wifely devotion: "the relation had become for her *simply a degrading servitude*. The law was sacred. Yes, but *rebellion* might be sacred too" (468; italics added).

In her historical reconstruction of the eccentric life of Romola, an educated woman in fifteenth-century Florence, and of utter subjugation to her husband, George Eliot seems to underline the remote origins of the state of complete subjugation to their husbands in which Victorian women, even intellectual women, were obliged to in marriage. Romola's attempt to abandon her unhappy marriage and escape the stifling conditions in which married women were kept in Renaissance Florence voices Eliot's critique of the institution of marriage in the Victorian Era. And Romola's helpless condition, which doesn't allow her to protect her father's library from Tito's greediness, seems the origin of a similar helpless condition, whereby Victorian married women were left vulnerable and unprotected by the restraining common law of property.

In Victorian England, when a woman married, all that she owned, inherited or earned belonged solely to her husband, entitled to dispose of it to his own liking. The injustice of the marriage laws was denounced also by many social theorists contemporary to Eliot. This is the case, for instance, with John Stuart Mill's indictment in his popular essay *The Subjection of Women*:

[for Victorian women] marrying is giving themselves *a master* [...] of all their earthly possessions [...]. [...] the wife is the *actual bond-servant* of her husband [...]. She can do no act whatever but by his permission, at least tacit. She can acquire no property but for him; the instant it becomes hers, even if by inheritance, it becomes *ipso facto* his. In this respect the wife's position under the common law of England is worse than that of slaves in the laws of many countries. ([1869] 1991, 501; italics added)

Such a striking parallel between the miserable living and working conditions of women in Victorian England and those of slaves was drawn in Eliot's time also by other eminent female writers, including her friend Harriet Martineau: "while woman's intellect is confined, her morals crushed, her health ruined, her weaknesses encouraged, and her strength punished" (as quoted in Carroll 1998, 106). Chief among those Victorian women who sought reform of the Victorian marriage law was especially Barbara Leigh Smith, later Bodichon, whose action impressed Eliot so much that from her she drew inspiration for her Italian heroine (cf. Strachey 1928, 38). Women's non-existence within marriage was Bodichon's polemical priority, which she tackled in her first nation-wide publication on this subject. Her remarkable pamphlet *A Brief Summary, in Plain Language, of the Most Important Laws concerning Women* (1854) listed for the first time the legal disabilities and restrictions under which women lived, reporting hundreds of instances of women losing everything on marrying a man who absconded after the wedding, thus leaving them destitute. Even worse, if such a woman were subsequently to earn or inherit any money, the errant husband could return at any time, seize all she had and leave her again. Not to mention also the abuse of power, that of disposing freely of a woman, granted to a man by the marriage institution, perpetrated when a man got married for the only purpose of holding possession of her wife's money. Miss Bodichon also managed to form a committee of 24 ladies, whose intention was to reform the law and give married women their inalienable right to their own property and the fruits of their labour. The "Petition for Reform of the Married Women's Property Law" which she drew up, gathered more than 3,000 signatures in London, including the name of Eliot, who believed that the proposed law could "help to raise the position and character of women" (*GEL*, 2, 225). Although the petitioners' request was rejected by the Parliament, this event actually represents the first organised feminist action in the United Kingdom and was followed by the "Married Women's Property Bill" (1857). However, it was only in 1870, when the first of the Married Women's Property Acts became law, that the injustice of the English marriage laws was removed. Finally, *The Englishwoman's Journal*, which Miss Bodichon purchased two years later, allowed her to disseminate nation-wide her ideas on women and the rights movement, and was welcomed heartily by Eliot as well: "It *must* be doing good substantially - stimulating woman to useful work, and rousing people generally to some consideration of women's needs" (*GEL*, 2, 225).

Romola's first signs of rebellion anticipate the future struggle of modern women like Eliot's militant friend Bodichon. Actually, Eliot seems to have figured her Italian heroine as an embodiment of Bodichon's activism, a goal for which Romola strives earnestly. Yet, although Eliot signed the Petition, she limited herself to a severe criticism of the institution of marriage through her writings and her own life experience. In 1854, she

violated all conventions about marriage through her unlawful elopement with the bohemian George Lewes, being consequently ostracized by her contemporaries as a 'fallen woman' and compelled to live "in the shadow of the world's disapproval" (Woolf 1954, 145). On 16th May 1880, at the age of sixty, she courted controversy once more by legally marrying a man twenty years younger than herself, John Walter Cross, changing her name to Mary Anne Cross.

A significant insight into Eliot's opinions on marriage is provided also by her analysis of the typical upper-class French marriage of the seventeenth century in her early essay *Woman in France* (1854):

No wise person, we imagine, wishes to restore the social condition of France in the seventeenth century, or considers the ideal programme to be a *mariage de convenance* at fifteen, a career of gallantry from twenty to eight-and-thirty, and penitence and piety for the rest of her days. Nevertheless, that social condition had its good results, as much as the madly-superstitious Crusaders had theirs. (Eliot 1990, 12)

Such "good results" included for instance the patronage of the arts by French women, who kept their *Salons* for their intellectual intercourses with men. Eliot held essentially liberal, yet not extremely radical, views on the subject of marriage and her conception rested on the equal status between husband and wife, insisting especially on the importance of reciprocity, which places the wife in a position that enables her to assert her own rights. Eliot's views of the oppressive *mariage de convenance*, by which innocent young girls were married to rich older men for social benefits rather than out of personal attachment, were influenced also by her reading of George Sand's social novel *Jacques* (1833), which deeply moved her. The protagonist Jacques is disappointed by his union to an uneducated and inexperienced wife, Fernande, and his words voice Sand's critique of the marriage institution as "une des plus barbares institutions" (1993, 136). Like her homonymous English sister novelist, George Sand demanded a reform of the marriage laws. But she also advocated freedom for married couples to pursue their relationship outside marriage, claiming that "le pacte du mariage [...] brise absolument les droits de propriété de tout un sexe" (136). Unlike Sand, Eliot was not in favour of open marriage, yet she was unconventional enough not to inscribe *Romola* - a novel hinged on a bitter criticism of the stifling social structures allowing men to impose marriage on women - to the man with whom she considered to be engaged in a marital relationship. The manuscript of Eliot's Italian novel opens indeed on the dedication of her story to her beloved Lewes, whom she insisted on calling "her own husband" despite not being formally married to him: "To the Husband whose perfect Love has been the best source of her insight & strength, this manuscript is given by his devoted Wife, the

writer" (as quoted in Rignall 2000, 341). Betrayed by Tito, Romola seems to experience a desire for emancipation similar to those of George Eliot's militant friends struggling to defend women's rights. She resolves to flee from the imprisoning world of her husband's house, as she leaves her home city disguised as a nun in a wintry dawn. This first flight propels her from the close confines of home into the outside world of the city of Florence and makes her temporarily experience a sense of freedom. A lonely and unhappy wife as she is, the heroine dreams of an "instructed independent life" for women and is determined to ask the Venetian woman scholar Cassandra Fedele (1465-1558) – considered "the most learned woman in the world" (Barrett 1996, 322) – how a woman of learning can support herself by scholarship. Alone among Eliot's heroines in receiving the same education reserved to men, Romola desires indeed to become "wise enough to write something which would rescue her father's name from oblivion" (322). Notably, her uncommon intelligence and remarkable education fuel her desire to vindicate an intellectual woman's right to scholarship against the strong contemporary social forces that opposed the participation of married women in scholarly enterprise.

Romola, however, is halted by Savonarola and commanded to return to Florence to follow the path of religious submission and fulfil her obligations to her marriage and her fellow citizens. Appealing to the "the bond of a higher love", higher even than the one provided by marriage, the Prior of San Marco accuses her of "turning [her] back to the lot that has been appointed for [her]" and "fleeing from the presence of God" (358), a warning which seems to imply that only through absolute obedience to God's will can moral good be attained. Savonarola reminds Romola that she is bound by "the ties of marriage, the state and religious discipleship" (358), the very three forces hindering her struggle for independence. Romola thus submits to that broader sense of social duty, maintained by many of Eliot's heroines, inherited from her father and sharpened by the Dominican friar. In Savonarola she finds both the ideal of personal duty and citizenship grounded in piety and the moral guidance she is desperately seeking after her father's death. Freed from the bonds of filial duty and wifely obedience, Romola now performs – equally dutifully – her role as a *Piagnone* (or 'Wailer'), as the adherents to Savonarola's religious party were labelled by their opponents. Therefore, under the influence of Savonarola's religious enthusiasm, Romola's yearning for an 'instructed' independence is redirected into compliance with benevolent subjugation, as she learns to "obey passively the guidance of outward claims" (365). Hence, the end of Book II ratifies her choice of relapse into renunciation and submission, this time to the puritanical patriarchal figure of Savonarola, as she vows: "Father, I will be guided. Teach me! I will go back" (362).

Once the umbilical cord that had kept her symbiotically tied to her father is cut, the range of Romola's sphere of influence is extended, as she wan-

ders about the streets of Florence as her “new home”. She adopts the role of a Madonna performing her duty of nursing the needy. Having even transformed her courtyard into a makeshift hospital, in the Florentine pestilence she passionately devotes herself to “tending the sick” and comforting the poor, like the “blessed mother” of all gracing the streets of her hometown. Notably, while famine is in the streets and Florence is threatened on all its borders by the imminent invasion of Charles VIII, it is Romola who saves from poverty Tito’s father, back in Florence as a prisoner of the King, by offering him shelter at her place. Driven by the self-denying instinct she has developed under Savonarola’s influence, Romola “had ceased to think that her own lot could be happy [...], to think of happiness at all: the one end of her life seemed to be the diminishing of sorrow” (388).

Suzanne Graver pointed out that Eliot “holds to the Comtean idea of women’s special sympathetic power and its importance as a corrective loss for community in modern society” (as quoted in Blake 2001, 215). Upon her return to Florence the heroine has not only recovered a new sense of vocation in her life – her “woman’s tenderness for father and husband, ha[ving] transformed itself into an enthusiasm of sympathy with the general life” (Barrett 1996, 388) – but she has also been reunited to her native community, for which she “stand[s] ready to answer to her name [...] feeling the stress of a common life” (468). Hence, as in *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot explores how the ego must be sacrificed to the community, as Romola replaces her female intellectual ambition and desire for autonomy with the principle of fidelity to community, channelling her intelligence into social good and Christian charity. This emphasis on membership in the human community characterizes also the vision for which Savonarola acts as a mouthpiece with his insistence on the identity of the religious and the political, since “the cause of [his] party is the cause of God’s kingdom” (492). The republican approach of his popular party was based on a call for reforming the Church founded on Christian principles in both public and private life. Yet, the republic he established after the expulsion of the ruling Medici was doomed to be short-lived, since he was excommunicated and eventually burned at stake for disobeying and defying the Pope by preaching under a ban. Therefore, the question central to the life of Romola, that of “where the sacredness of obedience ended and where the sacredness of rebellion began” (468) – as Eliot wrote in a letter to Richard Hutton in 1863 – “essentially coincides with the chief problem in Savonarola’s” (*GEL*, 4, 97). This juxtaposition of a male historical figure and a female fictional character allows Eliot to transcend the separation between history and fiction and microcosmically reproduce the tension, existing in all historical societies, between respect for tradition and for the traditional laws, and the necessity to sometimes break them in view of a broader social renewal. Indeed, the author was fully aware of how oppressive and unfair old laws might be (as the laws on marriage she

engaged to fight against with her friend Bodichon), whether in fifteenth-century Florence or nineteenth-century England or Italy. Therefore, she vests her heroine with the urgent desire to overthrow the political structures founded on male patriarchal values. At the same time, by fictionally showing that Romola's intellectual and ethical problem was the same as Savonarola's, Eliot established and consolidated her belief that the crucial point of the 'Woman Question' – that "essential condition at once of true womanly culture and of true social well-being" (1990, 36) – was the cooperation between male and female intellects in the progress of mankind. Namely, denying the superiority of male intellect over the female, Eliot affirmed her faith in the intellectual intercourse and social interaction across genders – of which she found an early embodiment in the *Salons*, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century aristocratic French "réunions of both sexes" (36) – which was still missing in Victorian England. Only that "marriage of minds" (36) Eliot appreciated in the French *Salons*, only the principle of intellectual cooperation between the sexes, Eliot believed, could lead to the formation of a balanced social milieu in which women's intellectual growth and social equality between the sexes could be fostered.

When Romola's Medicean godfather Bernardo Del Nero is sentenced to death for conspiring against the Florentine Republic, she is disappointed with Savonarola's cold refusal to intervene. While initially she was able to see a deep love of humanity behind Savonarola's wish for church renovation and the charitable activities performed by his religious order, now only the "ring of egoism" seems to resonate in his plans. Therefore, she rejects his guidance and, deprived even of her godfather's protection and comforting counsel, resolves to leave the city once again. Romola's flight from Florence is ultimately a liberation from the rigid patriarchal bonds and duties constraining her previous life as 'angel in the house': "a new rebellion had risen within her [...] she was alone now: she had freed herself from all the claims, [...] even from that burden of choice which presses with heavier and heavier weight when claims have loosed their guiding hold" (Berrett 1996, 501, 504).

In Chapter 61, Romola emulates Gostanza in Boccaccio's *The Decameron* seeking escape in drifting out to sea in a small boat which becomes a "gently lulling cradle of a new life" (551). As the heroine drifts ashore a nameless plague-stricken community, she emerges like a Renaissance Madonna, "in a purely Feuerbachian effort of human sympathy" (Ashton 2013, 265), as a rescuer of the few inhabitants left alive by the plague. Seeking a law outside religion and having failed to find it in the men – Bardo, Tito, Bernardo and Savonarola – who deceive her, Romola has finally managed to make "tenderness and keen fellow-feeling for the near and loved [...] the religion of her life" since "she felt there could be no law for her but the law of her affections" (320). Moreover, this experience among the plague-ridden Jews is "like a new baptism" to Romola – as Eliot describes

it – giving her a new purpose to her life, so that she finds strength to return homeward and reassume all her obligations as a “daughter of Florence”.

Back in Florence once more, Romola learns of Tito's and Baldassare's deaths – the latter having eventually had his vengeance on his ungrateful son's desertion – and at the end of the novel the readers find her reigning as a matriarch over Tito's illegitimate family. Indeed, her widowed cousin Monna Brigida, the helpless Tessa and her two children are reunited under the same roof where Romola cares for them all as “a stepmother who does not need authority from anyone other than her self” (Simpson 1998, 63). The achievement of the heroine's quest for autonomy and power, ultimately for a fully developed identity, is to be found precisely in this female-headed household on which the novel ends, since it is in Romola's choice of responsibilities that her full independence lies.

George Eliot allows her heroine to perform the maternal duty, which she regarded as both the highest form of duty of which women are capable and the quality distinguishing them from men: “that precious specialty lying quite apart from masculine aptitudes and experiences” (1990, 36). Yet, like her creator, Romola never becomes a ‘real’ mother, nor does she ever look after children of her own. She is called anyhow to assume the role of a stepmother to Tessa's children, by whom she is addressed to as ‘Mamma Romola’ and at least twice in the novel does she display a “ready maternal instinct”. In Chapter 56, in one of her walks into town she stops by to rescue a lost little boy who soon turns out to be Lillo. In Chapter 68 she saves and temporarily adopts a Jewish infant, whom she christens Benedetto, the only survivor in a family annihilated by the pestilence. Through the idea of a family headed by a mother figure who is not a natural but an adoptive and surrogate mother, “the ideal community” – unconventionally pairing the angel in the house with the unconventional woman – is “not exactly a family, but *like* a family” (McDonagh 2001, 51), mirroring George Eliot's own experience as a stepmother. While writing *Romola*, she had already assumed her role as a ‘Mutter’ to Lewes's sons and was a ‘spiritual mother’ to her young British fellow-women.

As Dorothea Barrett (1991) remarked, the image of the Madonna exploited throughout the novel shows the power of the Virgin, traditionally supporting divine patriarchy, as rather a substitute for patriarchal power. Notably, the central chapters of the novel are entitled “The Unseen Madonna” (ch. 43) and “The Visible Madonna” (ch. 44), then Romola is addressed to by her fellow citizens as Madonna Romola, while she is a “Madonna of Restoration” and a “Blessed Lady”, the Virgin Mary herself, for a village decimated by the plague. Finally, the image of her carrying Benedetto on her arms resembles a ‘Holy Mother with the Babe’ picture. *Romola* thus presents a “reversal of the male-high and female-low structure” (Barrett 1996, xxiii), since within the matriarchal family the heroine assumes the place of the male authoritative figure, both as a father and as an educator.

In rescuing the other female characters of the novel from distress, Romola appears to have taken over also Tito's protective role. Such a displacement of the male-father figure is presented especially in the final scene of the novel, where Romola is shown to be in Tito's place, which has now become 'her place':

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*. (581; italics added)

Separated from her husband and a childless mother, Romola stands up as a model of an intellectual woman who succeeds in her "womanly labours" (387) even without winning the man's love and without having children. Caroline Levine underlines how *Romola* "has radically revised conventional relations between wife and mistress, having adopted her husband's lover as her own partner. Affirming a startling independence, the women run the household together, free from the demands of men" (1998, 137). Hence, the position of moral authority in which she appears at the end of the novel seems to suggest the possibility for women of escaping patriarchal hegemony and finding a 'space' to exercise their influence within the restraint placed on women by rigid gender conventions.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that for several reasons the epilogue cannot be considered a complete endorsement of female self-assertion, as Romola does not succeed in achieving a truly liberating status of the intellectual woman unrestrained by the roles of the nurse, Madonna and mother. The final setting of the novel is an all-female household set up by three women, the heroine eventually returns to the enclosed space of domesticity she had earlier escaped from. Romola becomes a tutor to Tito's illegitimate son, whom she instructs in the same learning her father had transmitted to her. On the one hand, this scene presents a reversal in the traditional transmission of knowledge, whereby women humanists were educated by men: Romola, a scholarly assistant to her father instructed by him at the beginning of the novel, turns into a tutor herself to another man at the end of the story. On the other hand, Lillo's thirteen-year-old sister Ninna is placed in a subordinate position as she sits in a corner, weaving wreaths for Savonarola's altar, and is not granted the possibility to receive instruction too. Therefore, the novel's contradictory ending seems to perpetuate a system in which learning is still a prerogative of boys, while girls are left accepting silently their duty and work. Finally, what Romola continually describes to Lillo is her admiration for the martyred friar Savonarola, whose influence has been inspiring for her. Hence, one of the last images the readers are left with is that of Romola worshipping the

image of Savonarola, that is the image of patriarchal authority from which the heroine seems incapable to detach herself. In other words, Eliot seems to have identified in passionate resignation the balanced solution to the extreme opposites of patient passivity, epitomized by the figure of the Madonna, and intransigence, exemplified by an unconventional behaviour wavering between daughterly obedience, sisterly piety and rebellion against patriarchal authority. As highlighted by Kelly Battles, Romola's withdrawal from the public stage coincides also with her retreat from the historical scene, so that the novel becomes the space where history is 'domesticated': "Romola shows a pathway by which women can achieve agency as *historical actors*, but this agency persists only for as long as they remain childless and active operators within the public sphere" (2009, 224; italics added).

Romola's final decision to abandon Savonarola's dogma and reject his rigid doctrine results from her incapacity to act in the name of a moral code that could execute her godfather, since she is seeking a wider vision than the Friar's stern and fanatical version of Christianity, leading him to die as 'a martyr' witnessing the destruction of his own ideas. Yet, Romola has retained for her human ethic what seems useful and right in his teaching, namely the sense of human fellowship he has awakened in her, leading her to assume a new sympathetic morality interpreted by many critics as analogous to Comte's Positivist 'Religion of Humanity'. Hence, a slow, yet profound, evolution is traced in the heroine's character through the spiritual journey she undertakes in the novel, which reflects George Eliot's own religious crisis leading her to disavow her Evangelical faith to embrace the so-called 'Religion of Suffering'. Initially a Pagan, Romola then approaches the Christian faith to ultimately accept the 'Religion of Humanity' against the fanatical religious dogmatism of a corrupt government. Moreover, Romola's human principles and values are very similar to those supporting her fictional sister heroine Maggie Tulliver's renunciation of her aspiration to moral freedom and independence, crushed, as she is, by the burden of family traditions, past obligations and social responsibilities. In this respect, many readers might agree with Rosemary Ashton's definition of Romola as a "generalized, and at the end idealized, version of Maggie Tulliver, feminist in feeling but submitting herself to *her sense of duty* to others" (2013, 295). Against the general modern trend of the predominance of mind and knowledge over feelings and passion, deriving mainly from the philosophy of the Enlightenment, Eliot identified moral greatness in the capacity for sympathy and posited it in her novels as the essential requirement for women to be able to overcome men's egotism.

Eventually Romola emerges into unselfishness, or 'fellow-feeling', from the constraints of the egotism inherited from her father and then displayed as a zealous devotee of Savonarola, as she learns true "sympathy with the individual lot" through the painful experiences of her husband's betrayals and her commitment to humanitarian service. Thus, Romola appears capa-

ble to find a balance between renunciation and resistance in her ultimate definition of her autonomous identity. With her example, she provides a solution to male egotism, epitomized by Bardo's intellectual snobbery and Tito's hedonistic desire for social success, without being forced to the utter self-denial epitomized, instead, by Savonarola's martyrdom. Behind the notion of egoism of George Eliot's ethical humanism stands Comtean Positivism, replacing the Christian notion of original sin with the idea of 'the difficulty of the human lot'. Feuerbachian psychology as well, which presumes the essential goodness of human beings, forms the basis of Eliot's faith in the "good within them" (*GEL*, 5, 448) that lies at the heart of her sceptical ethical humanism. Like her Florentine heroine, Eliot rejected the most dogmatic and rigid elements of religion and explored the possibility of goodness without "God's all-seeing eye" (Reynolds 2008, 167) in an essentially humanist way. Her stance on religion is clearly explained in a letter she sent to Mrs Harriet Beecher Stowe:

I believe that religion has to be modified - 'developed', according to the dominant phrase - and that a religion more perfect than any yet prevalent, must express less care for personal consolation, and a more deeply-awing sense of responsibility to man, springing from sympathy with that which of all things is most certainly known to us, the difficulty of the human lot. (*GEL*, 5, 31)

It is true that Romola is debarred from the vocation of a scholar or the possibility of pursuing a public career; in this sense she is, like her successor Dorothea Brooke, a "foundress of nothing" (Ashton 2011, 4). Yet, self-reliant and mature, she emerges as a self-defined individual in a patriarchal society in which she manages to find 'her place' without sacrificing her 'self'. Eventually she triumphs because, as the future narrator of *Middlemarch* was later to conclude - celebrating the quiet happiness of the small domestic duties to which an affectionate woman is called to dedicate herself - "the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life and rest in unvisited tombs" (838).

It remains doubtful whether the protagonist of *Romola* - alone amongst George Eliot's novels to be given a woman's name as its title - can be labelled as an 'ideal', or rather 'utopian', heroine. In this respect, Eliot shared Sara Hennel's accusation of having "painted a goddess and not a woman". As her friend wrote:

Romola is pure idealism [...] a being who could be so loved, so wanted, as you show her, is so utterly blissful to my conception, that, if not envied, she must be worshipped as a beautiful saint [...], one that by the

very *eagerness of her desire for human fellowship* never succeeded in obtaining it; one who, feeling intensely that the only salvation from her own inner sins and sorrows was in loving communion with fellow beings, yet *felt herself for ever rejected* as exactly the nature that is not capable of communicating that which really makes her a blessing to others; *one whose most earnest efforts to get out of self are always a most desperate flinging back upon self* – simply because all endeavours to cling must always be an encumbrance. It is only those who want nothing for themselves, that can really be wanted by others. (*GEL*, 4, 103; italics added)

To quote Leslie Stephen, *Romola* can be read as an attempt by the novelist-historian to record “the last traces of [a disappearing and idealized way of life] vanishing so rapidly amidst the change of modern revolution that its picture could hardly be drawn again” (1971, 469). Actually in this novel – Eliot’s only historical novel set in a remote past – George Eliot investigates a pre-industrial order swept away by the materialistic, middle-class values of the Victorian age, since only such a coherent order “could perform the function of knowledge for an ardently willing soul” (Ashton 2011, 3), as she claims in the “Prelude” to *Middlemarch*. Yet, in the opening of the “Proem” to *Romola*, Eliot shortens the distance between fifteenth-century Florence and the contemporary England of the Victorian readership to mitigate its exoticism: Renaissance Florence is “seeming to stand as an almost unviolated symbol, amidst the flux of human things, to remind us that we still resemble the men of the past more than we differ from them” (Barrett 1996, 2). Hence, *Romola* appears to transcend the centuries and recover a sense of the difficulty of the human lot as what is common to both modern and ancient human beings across centuries of historical and political changes. Furthermore, several scenes of the last book 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” (1996, xv). Notably, Tessa’s place stands immune to the contingent restraints of androcentric culture and society which limited an intellectual woman’s contribution to cultural development, and yet permitted Eliot’s own success as a self-made intellectual woman. She struggled to write *Romola* in the severely limited space allowed to a talented woman of her time, being compliant and yet necessarily resistant to that patriarchal culture which gave her intellectual birth. “Suffer[ing] the slavery of being a girl” (Cave 2003, 358), Eliot felt compelled to write under the guise of a man, adopting a male pseudonym which allowed her to justify her intellectual authority by reinventing her social identity in order to voice her plea for an equal participation of men and women in shaping society and its cultural development. Hence, through the return to a pre-industrial world, unmolested by history and untroubled by the constraining ideologies of nineteenth-century bourgeois patriarchy, Eliot relegates the unbearable

lot of nineteenth-century women to an ahistorical place. Yet, an implicit parallel between Renaissance Florence and mid-Victorian England was very early underlined by many critics, assuming these were both times of social upheaval, as well as of religious and political turbulence. Notably, Richard Hutton (1863), with whom Eliot engaged in correspondence while writing *Romola*, identified the relation of the Florentine setting with the author's contemporary age: the purpose of the story is "to trace out the conflict between liberal culture and the more passionate form of the Christian faith in that strange era, which has so many points of resemblance with the present [...]" (1971, 2263). In this respect, Felicia Bonaparte's speculation about the eponymous character's possible role as a "thoroughly contemporary figure, the Victorian intellectual struggling to resolve the dilemmas of the modern age" (1979, 377) appears reasonable. Simultaneously, while reading *Romola* as a critique of the constrained lot of Eliot's women peers, it is impossible not to identify also the author's self-projection in a woman able to transcend a whole series of cultural and social proscriptions. Indeed, "the closeness of relation between heroine and author" (Leavis 1948, 62) marks *Romola* as well as it had previously marked *The Mill on the Floss*. In Leavis' words, *Romola* is:

another idealized George Eliot, less real than Maggie Tulliver and more idealized. While patrician and commandingly beautiful, she has also George Eliot's combination of intellectual power, emancipation, inherent piety and hunger for exaltations. (48)

As exemplified by Eliot's own experience as an outstanding, unconventional intellectual woman, "the shifting relation between passion and duty" (Byatt 1979, 511) - in other words feeling and knowledge, traditionally ascribed to the female and the male sex respectively - can resolve itself into a positive cooperation not only in Renaissance Florence, but also in Victorian England. Indeed, George Eliot herself managed to reconcile male intellect and female feeling - that combination all her heroines in different ways aim at achieving - in her own person, integrating her overpowering "need to be loved" (316) with a resistance to the ideological pressure on Victorian middle-class women to conform.

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