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## **Gender and History in George Eliot's *Romola***

When Richard Holt Hutton reviewed *Romola* for the *Westminster Review* in 1863, he established the groundwork for many later interpretations of the novel. Hutton expressed reservations about Eliot's decision to move away from her standard nineteenth-century British setting and about her use of historical detail, which he considered ponderous. Tito Melema was for Hutton (as he was for Henry James [485]) the most interesting figure in the novel, and the conception of Romola Bardi, he thought, was not fully realised. "We do not say that the character is not natural," he wrote; "we only say it is half-revealed and more suggested than fully painted, though these harder feminine characters always seem to ask to be outlined more strongly than any others." Hutton had no difficulty with the much more sketchily painted portrait of Savonarola, however, which he praised for being "as faithful as history, as it is great as romance" (62). As far as Hutton was concerned, Eliot should have ended the novel with Savonarola's death, for this "would have formed a far higher artistic ending to her story than the somewhat feeble and womanish chapter with which it concludes" (63-4).<sup>1</sup> Robert Browning, too, was annoyed that in the latter parts of *Romola* "the great interests, Savonarola and the Republic, which I expected would absorb attention and pay for the previous minutenesses, dwindled strangely" (quoted in Newton 14). Both Hutton and Browning were requiring, in other words, a novel entitled not *Romola* but *Savonarola*—a novel focussed not on feminine but on masculine power.

In recent years, critics have responded to the objections of Hutton and others by equating Romola's experience with "man's moral history" (Bonaparte 72) and tracing in the novel's plot the narrative patterns of the epic, the morality play, the allegory, the fable, the bildungsroman, and, most recently, the "continuous historical" apo-

calypse" (Carpenter 61). Most of these readings concentrate on the stages of Romola's personal development: from her early attachment to a pagan father, through her phase of commitment to Savonarola's Christianity, and finally to her independent assumption of a new sympathetic morality—viewed by many as analogous to Comte's Religion of Humanity.<sup>2</sup>

Such a teleological reading is complicated, however, not only by its unquestioning assumption of a myth of historical progression, but also by the fact that Eliot has chosen as her emblematic human figure a female character whose place in her historical setting is determined in part by her gender. Although Eliot in her depiction of Romola's unhappy marriage writes beyond the conventional ending of the romance plot, her closure of the quest plot is weakened by the limitations placed on her heroine by her culture's construction of gender.<sup>3</sup> There is a pervasive tension in the novel, therefore, between the teleological thrust of its historical plot and the static repetitiveness of its gender plot, which consistently places its heroine in positions of subordination to men. As is often the case in Eliot's fiction, the plot elicits a double reading,<sup>4</sup> which emerges from a radical disjunction between the aims achieved by the novel's conventional plot and the desire for a different ending fostered by the narrative's detailed attention to the consequences of sexual difference in patriarchal culture: the gender plot deconstructs the narrative of personal development and historical progression, exposing its privileging of the masculine.

The gender plot in *Romola*—as well as the tensions that accompany its disruptive presence in the conventional plot—is apparent even in the novel's Proem, in which the Spirit of a fifteenth-century man speaks nostalgically of the Florentine streets "where he inherited the eager life of his fathers" (46) and ponders the fate of his city with questions that reflect a view of history based entirely on masculine struggles for power:

How has it all turned out? Which party is likely to be banished and have its houses sacked just now? Is there any successor of the incomparable Lorenzo . . . ? And what famous scholar is dictating the Latin letters of the Republic—what fiery philosopher is lecturing on Dante in the Duomo. . . ? (49)

The only references to women made by the Spirit of the Age presume their subordinate status as nursemaids, daughters, or—in the case of the Madonna Annunziata—idealized emblems of chaste submission. The narrator, however, rejects the Spirit's preoccupation with mascu-

line hegemony and directs his eye to the abiding human presence in Florence, its “upturned living faces, and lips moving to the old prayers for help” (50). These two conflicting attitudes to history—one based on struggles for power, the other on what Eliot repeatedly called “sympathy”—remain in opposition throughout the novel: the narrative that follows the Proem answers the Spirit’s questions, but in so doing exposes the narrowness and destructiveness of his curiosity about the vagaries of political and intellectual sovereignty.

Browning’s expectation that the ending of *Romola* would resolve questions about political power is not, therefore, entirely without basis: the novel’s most explicitly historical scenes do indeed dwell on the struggles for supremacy that took place when Florence was “orphaned” (86) by the loss of its presiding patriarch, Lorenzo de’ Medici. The early chapters are, in fact, confusing to the reader looking for an explanation of the novel’s title. The first mention of Romola does not come until the end of the third chapter—Nello alludes to her as worth seeing along with Bardo’s scholarly “collections” (84)—and the reader does not encounter her directly until Chapter Five, in which she is seen as a static emblem of daughterly devotion.<sup>5</sup> The first four chapters of the novel establish a context for this scene, however, by depicting the masculine world that requires the subordination of Romola and other women to the men who father and marry them. Such a culture depends, as Luce Irigaray has argued, on an “hom(m)o-sexual monopoly” (171) in which “the use and traffic in women” supports a masculine power structure that maintains its supremacy by “speculations . . . and more or less rivalrous appropriations” between men. Hom(m)o-sexuality, according to Irigaray, “is played out through the bodies of women,” and heterosexuality is “just an alibi for the smooth workings of man’s relation with himself, of relations among men” (172). In such a culture, homosexual love is taboo, and heterosexual relations between men and women merely reinforce the bonds of power between men.<sup>6</sup>

In the early chapters of *Romola*, the reader watches Tito Melema embraced by such an hom(m)o-sexual male culture, imaged especially in “Apollo and the Razor,” the barber-shop described by its owner Nello as “the focus of Florentine intellect, and in that sense the navel of the earth” (78).<sup>7</sup> Here Tito’s “initiation into the mysteries of the razor” (79) is presented as a male rite of passage leading to inspiration. In an inversion of the Samson story that excludes Delilah altogether, Machiavelli links “delicate shaving” with sharpness of intellect, while Nello promises Tito that his new appearance will bring him power and

women. The market-place that sustains Nello's barber-shop is a world in which women are casually associated with other objects of exchange. Bratti, explaining his absence from his shop, declares, "I've got a wife and a raven to stay at home and mind the stock" (55-6). The same equation of women with animals appears in Nello's comments about the ominous signs following upon Lorenzo's death: "several cows and women have had still-born calves this Quaresima; and for the bad eggs that have been broken since the Carnival, nobody has counted them" (61).

Nello's failure to distinguish between cows and women is echoed in the presentation of Tessa, the only sharply defined female character in the novel's opening chapters. Bratti first offers to take Tito to Tessa, "the prettiest damsel in the Mercato" (56), if Tito will give him in exchange information about himself. Tito refuses this masculine bargain and decides to spend instead a "medium of exchange" that cannot be used against him by other men: since he has no money, he sets out to "get [his] breakfast for love" (68)—conferring his affection on any damsel who will feed him. Tito's strategy of earning his milk by kissing Tessa is interestingly close to female prostitution, but its results could not be more different: in his masculine economy, Tito can spend his sexuality freely and widely without loss because as a man he is an agent rather than an object of exchange.

Tessa, however, is from the first moment she appears a commodity to be bought and sold. Tito glimpses her, not only with the milk that she sells, but also with the animals of labour that bear it to market:

In a corner, . . . two mules were standing, well adorned with red tassels and collars. One of them carried wooden milk-vessels, the other a pair of panniers filled with herbs and salads. Resting her elbow on the neck of the mule that carried the milk, there leaned a young girl, apparently not more than sixteen, with a red hood surrounding her face. . . . The poor child, perhaps, was weary after her labour . . . for she seemed to have gone to sleep in that half-standing, half-leaning posture. (68)

Here the "red tassels and collars" of the mules are translated into Tessa's "red hood"; she appears as a particularized version of "the hardy, scant-feeding peasant-women" who stream into the city "with a year's labour in a moderate bundle of yarn on their backs" (193)—yarn that eventually finds its way into the sack of the swindling Bratti.

When Romola is finally introduced in Chapter Five, she too is seen as a performer of work useful to men—though because of her class she does not bear the fruits of her labour on her back. Romola reads to her father Bardo, but is assumed by him not to have the intelligence to



interpret what she reads. Bardo's basic misogyny is apparent in his cursing references to lamiae and harpies, as well as in his praise of Romola for being different from "the herd of [her] sex" (181) and having "a man's nobility of soul" (100). Bardo seems an aged and scholarly version of Mr. Brooke of *Middlemarch* when he tells his daughter that "the sustained zeal and unconquerable patience demanded from those who would tread 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" (97). Like Maggie Tulliver, Romola is considered inferior to her brother, unqualified to use her mind because it is enclosed in a female body. Romola's only way of pleasing her father, therefore, is to bring him a replacement for the son who had abandoned him. The novel's courtship scenes, in which Bardo's erotic attraction to Tito is carefully depicted, seem, in fact, to be an ideal fulfillment of Romola's resolve to find a substitute son for her father. Long before the first kiss between Romola and Tito, Bardo has lingeringly touched Tito's hand, hair, and face. The focus of the proposal scene is Tito's prospective role, not as a husband, but as a son:

"Will you let me be always and altogether your son? Will you let me take care of Romola—be her husband? I think she will not deny me. She has said she loves me. . . ."

"Is it true, my Romola?" said Bardo, in a lower tone, an evident vibration passing through him. . . .

"Yes, father," said Romola, firmly. "I love Tito—I wish to marry him, that we may both be her children and never part."

Tito's hand met hers in a strong clasp for the first time, while she was speaking, but their eyes were fixed anxiously on her father.

"Why should it not be?" said Bardo. . . .

"It would be a happiness to me; and thou, too, Romola, wouldst be the happier for it." (181)

Romola seems absent altogether from the arrangements for her marriage. It is Bardo who chooses Sante Croce for the betrothal and marriage ceremonies because that is where he hopes to be buried. In their sexual relationship, Tito encourages Romola to be passive, "subdued into mere enjoyment" (240) like the image of Ariadne in his own altered version of "The Triumph of Bacchus."<sup>8</sup> The financial arrangements for the marriage are made not only by Bardo and Tito, but also by Bernardo del Nero, Romola's godfather, who suggests that Tito support Bardo financially "in place of the *morgen-cup*" (250)—thus handing over to Romola's father the money paid to a bride on the morning after her wedding. It is not surprising, therefore, that it is Ber-

nardo who tells Bardo with regard to Romola, "thou hast a rare gem of thy own; take care no one gets it who is not likely to pay a worthy price" (122). Though Bernardo's tone is certainly less coarse than Nello's when he describes Romola as Bardo's "virgin gold" (142), the underlying assumptions of the two men are the same: Romola is for both an object of exchange.

That such different characters as Nello and Bernardo should have similar views about women is a comment less on them than on the patriarchal culture in which they live, which is described with great particularity in precisely those scenes of Florentine life that many critics have declared to be extraneous.<sup>9</sup> Eliot's famous defense of the historical material in *Romola* (made in response to Hutton's review), that "It is the habit of my imagination to strive after as full a vision of the medium in which a character moves as of the character itself" (Eliot to Hutton, 8 Aug. 1863, *Letters* 4.97), can apply as much to gender as to other culturally determined ideologies. The force of gender definitions is vividly apparent, for example, in the novel's Florentine festivals, all of which are dominated by grotesque images of masculine supremacy. The feast of San Giovanni culminates in the appearance of "the car of the Zecca or Mint," displaying on its thirty-foot summit "a living representative of St John the Baptist" (139); the saintly figure is linked by the narrator not only to Florence's money but also to its pagan patron, Mars. Though the statue of "the Man-destroyer" no longer stands on the banks of the Arno, we are told, "spear and shield could be hired by gold florins, and on the gold florins there had always been the image of San Giovanni" (130).

The Peasant's Fair, held on the feast of the Nativity of the Virgin, appears at first to contrast with the masculine and mercenary tone of the feast of San Giovanni. Here the reader is presented with a procession not of male Florentine worthies but of "barefooted, hard-heeled contadine" with "sun-dried, bronzed faces" and "strange, fragmentary garb, dim with hereditary dirt" (193). These women, clothed with signs of their closeness to the earth rather than with signs of their power, proceed to the Church of the Nunziata, where they find themselves competing with "another multitude," a "crowd of votive waxen images, the effigies of great personages" and "Florentines of high name": "popes, emperors, kings, cardinals, and famous condottieri." These images, "spreading high and far over the walls and ceiling" and "pressing close against each other, that they might be nearer the potent Virgin" (200), are the permanent presences in the Church, as they are the real embodiments of power in Florence (the Spirit of the Age re-

calls in the Proem that he had such a waxen image in the church as well [47]). Here the "potent Virgin" stands as a hollow, desexualized, and abstract image of woman, a phallic emblem and a focus for male power. A privileging of masculine hegemony is equally apparent in the street scenes of the Peasant's Fair. Here Bratti uses "mercantile coquetry" (194) to swindle superstitious peasant women, and the conjuror advertises sham marriage ceremonies that can be "dissolved . . . at every man's own will and pleasure" (197).

A masculine pleasure-principle also dominates the celebration of the Carnival, depicted in its pagan guise on the day of Romola's betrothal and in its Christian incarnation after Savonarola has instituted the Pyramid of Vanities. In the first celebration, "boys and striplings" demand tribute money of everyone in the crowd and conclude the evening with "the standing entertainment of stone-throwing," which, the narrator comments, "was not entirely monotonous, since the consequent maiming was various, and it was not always a single person who was killed" (253). In the second carnival, the same boys—now transformed by Savonarola into "beardless inquisitors" (499)—demand tribute money for their red crosses and humiliate women by stripping them of all decoration. Monna Brigida suffers a horrible indignity at the hands of these "cherubic" boys (516), and Tessa—who is harrassed or assaulted at all three of the novel's festivals—is rescued from them by Romola only at the last minute.<sup>10</sup>

A more sinister version of the crude masculine aggression of the street festivals takes place, behind closed doors and among the most politically powerful men of the city, at the supper in the Rucellai Gardens. Like the gatherings in the barber shop, this scene is erotically charged, as alliances of power and influence are formed between men. Attempting to cajole Tito into their conspiracy, Tornabuoni puts his leg across Tito's knee and caresses his ankle, while Pucci lays his hand on Tito's shoulder. At the meal itself, which appears like a parody of Christ's last supper, the "expensive toughness" of the sacramental meal—an unplucked peacock, comically suggestive of male vanity—makes it inedible. Even these men, the narrator tells us, would have preferred "the vulgar digestibility of capon," but were not "bold" enough to ask for the softer flesh of the castrated bird (412).

Though most of the male characters in *Romola* participate in these rituals of hom(m)o-sexual culture, the presence of the artist Piero di Cosimo refutes the notion that such activities are necessarily or essentially male. Though he does not allow Nello to shave off his beard, Piero has, in fact, the sharpest intelligence in the novel. He is the only

character to see Romola's position clearly, as that of Antigone in both her classic situations: loyal daughter of a blind father and defier of patriarchal authority. Piero does not, what's more, play masculine power games and, as if to identify himself with the feminine, lives exclusively on eggs, opening his door only to the young girl who delivers them. Piero's unique position in the plot of *Romola* challenges the ideology of rigid gender definitions. Significantly, it is he who in the novel's Epilogue disapproves of Romola's altar to Savonarola.<sup>11</sup>

While the masculine world of *Romola* is depicted in punctilious detail, the feminine life of its heroine is often hidden in narrative gaps that undermine the illusion of narrative continuity and challenge the teleological movement of the conventional plot. One of the most significant of these occurs between Books One and Two, where the story leaps from the betrothal, set during the carnival of 1492, to the appearance of the French king in Florence, which takes place in November of 1494, more than eighteen months after the marriage of Romola and Tito (which is never depicted). Absent too from the chronological narrative is an account of Bardo's death, which takes place in the late summer of 1494 but is not described until it is reported as Romola's memory three months later. A result of these breaks in narrative continuity is that the focus is shifted from Romola and Tito's sexual consummation to its unhappy aftermath and from the drama of Romola's shock at the loss of her father to its effect on her marriage. This foreshortening moves the narrative forward immediately to the crises in Romola's relationship with Tito, presented as a series of chilling struggles for "mastery"—most of which he wins because of his power as a husband. As he says to Romola in a sentence startlingly free of logical connectives, "The event is irrevocable, the library is sold, and you are my wife" (358).

Eliot's treatment of Romola's marriage looks backward to Janet Dempster's physical abuse in *Scenes of Clerical Life* and forward to the disastrous marriages of Dorothea Brooke and Gwendolen Harleth. But perhaps because of the distancing effect created by the Renaissance Italian setting, Eliot is never more daring than in *Romola* in allowing her heroine to abandon an unhappy marriage.<sup>12</sup> The process is depicted in several stages, as Romola gradually frees herself from the belief that she must stay in a "degrading servitude" (552).<sup>13</sup> Her first flight from Tito is stopped by Savonarola, who quickly reduces her to passivity by addressing her as "my daughter." Significantly, this assumption by Savonarola of a paternal role deters Romola from

seeking out Cassandra Fedele, the greatest female scholar of Italy. Conversion to Savonarola's ideals constitutes a return to patriarchy.

It can be argued, as Mary Wilson Carpenter has done (71), that there is a value in Savonarola's argument that Romola has a responsibility to the people of Florence. His emphasis on "the debt of a wife" (430) is troubling, however, for Romola has just felt relief at escaping "the breath of soft hated lips warm upon her cheek" (400). Appearing "as if the words were being wrung from her," she confesses that she has lost her sexual feelings for Tito: "My husband . . . he is not . . . my love is gone!" (435) When Savonarola responds by speaking of a "higher love" that is not "carnal," Romola reverts to the issue he is evading, that if she goes back to Tito he may require a sexual response from her: "Yes if—oh, how could I bear—" Romola, we are told by the narrator, "had involuntarily begun to say something which she sought to banish from her mind again."<sup>14</sup> These are Romola's last words of protest, and Savonarola's answer to her inarticulate desperation is to urge self-sacrifice: "Make your marriage-sorrows an offering too, my daughter" (436). After this scene, there is another significant gap, and Romola is not described until twenty-two months later, when she is seen ministering to the sick in the streets of Florence and so fulfilling Savonarola's injunction that she carry out her responsibilities as a "daughter of Florence" (438). The absence, however, of any reference to the sexual implications of Romola's return to Tito makes this fulfillment incomplete and unsatisfying. The issue of Tito's possession of Romola's sexuality, so dramatically raised in her dialogue with Savonarola, is left unresolved, a wide fissure in the conventional plot that attempts to give meaning to Romola's return to Florence.<sup>15</sup>

Romola's second decision to leave her marriage is made "without any counsel of her godfather or of Savonarola" (553). In what F. R. Leavis called a scene "embarrassingly like a girlhood dream" (49), Romola rejects all sources of authority and in a mood of "new rebellion" and "new despair" (586) drifts off in a sailboat in quest of death or "a new life" (589). As far as the gender plot is concerned, this sequence represents Romola's only full break from the "hom(m)o-sexual monopoly" of Florence. A salient detail in such a reading is that Romola gets the idea to drift off to sea from a story in the *Decameron*, the book she had read furtively for her own pleasure while her father was asleep and whose destruction in the Pyramid of Vanities Piero laments. Gostanza's story, grouped in Boccaccio with the tales of lovers "who won happiness after grief or misfortune" (255), is significantly different, however, from Romola's. Gostanza's despair stems

not from dead affection but from the belief that her lover is dead, and her suicidal journey finally brings her to marriage and happiness. Romola's experience is an inversion of Gostanza's, an escape from patriarchy rather than a return to it. Coming not before marriage but in the wake of its bitter deterioration, Romola's transformation lies in her role—not unlike that of Savonarola in Florence—of moral leadership: the romance plot has given way to the quest plot. Interestingly, Romola's guidance is offered first of all to men, a fifteen-year-old boy and a priest pathetic in his fear of the plague.

Eliot's adaptation of Boccaccio's story is also different from the original because it is embedded in an otherwise realistic and historical narrative. Romola's departure to a place without a name where she becomes the subject not of written history but of oral legend has often been troubling to critics, many of whom see the incident as a form of escapism on Eliot's part—a retreat from her historical subject into an imagined world of romance. In terms of the gender plot, however, this device seems appropriate: those who, like George Levine, see a basic conflict between the novel's historical context and Romola's "personal, free, uncontingent life of the romantic heroine" (94)<sup>16</sup> fail to see that Romola's lack of engagement in political life is as much a historical contingency as Tito's and Savonarola's immersion in it. She is unable to find a place in the history of Florence except as a wife or daughter, and so her "new life" begins in a place where she is not known to occupy either of these subordinate roles. That this shift in Romola's position requires a radical departure from the plot's heretofore realistic technique is a dramatic manifestation of the restrictions of gender in the novel's "realistic" world. It is worth noting that this scene, like the flood scene at the end of *The Mill on the Floss*, was part of Eliot's original conception of the novel, not a desperate attempt to escape from the complexities of an unmanageable plot.<sup>17</sup> In both cases, the departure from "realistic" narrative form is a commentary on the masculine power structure it depicts: the gender plot takes over from the progressive historical plot and moves the action into a realm outside patriarchy. If, as Susan M. Greenstein has suggested, the historical novel is male territory (495), then Eliot's adaptation of the genre must somehow alter its conventions in order to accommodate the female subject.

This generic shift is apparent in the imagery used to describe Romola's state of mind as she drifts in the boat:

Memories hung upon her like the weight of broken wings that could never be lifted—memories of human sympathy which even in its pains

leaves a thirst that the Great Mother has no milk to still. Romola felt orphaned in those wide spaces of sea and sky. She read no message of love for her in that far-off symbolic writing of the heavens, and with a great sob she wished that she might be gliding into death. She drew the cowl over her head again and covered her face, choosing darkness rather than the light of the stars, which seemed to her like the hard light of eyes that looked at her without seeing her. (590)

Here the images used to describe Romola's feelings about the inadequacy of the maternal earth and her rejection by the paternal sky parallel her actual orphaned state: she had lost her mother as a child and was then deprived of love from a father who immersed himself in "symbolic writing" and, like the stars, "looked at her without seeing her."<sup>18</sup> Significantly, when Romola awakens again, she finds herself in a place described in images associated with a maternal body (Emery 98): her flight from Florence and the Law of the Father that is inscribed in the symbolic order allows a return to pre-Oedipal union with the mother.

From this perspective, it is tempting to see the plague-village sequence as a solution to the dilemmas portrayed in the earlier chapters of *Romola*—a genuine "girlhood dream," though not in the sense that Leavis meant. To see the novel in this way, however, would be to impose on it another teleological reading and to ignore the destabilizing elements both in these scenes and in the Epilogue—elements that show the gender plot deconstructing the fulfillment even of the quest plot. There is the point, for example, that Romola's idealization by the people of the plague-village is a continuation of her position as object. Tito, after all, had also idealized her, and the patriarchs of Florence had carried the Madonna of L'Impruneta—another "potent Virgin" that is really a totem of male power—in the name of both protection and conquest. As Margaret Homans has recently written, Romola "is in [the plague-village] scene a holy object of beauty, spied upon by profane male eyes, much as Tiresias spied upon Minerva in the passage from Politian Romola once read to her father. . . . To be a mother, even the Madonna, . . . is also to be the maternal body so feared by Western culture" (206-07).

That Eliot herself saw the dangerous implications of idealization is apparent in her essay on Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft, published in 1855, in which she translates the words of the Roman magnates about Romulus: "let him be a god, provided he be not living." Eliot then comments, "and so men say of women, let them be idols, useless absorbents of precious things, provided we are not



obliged to admit them to be strictly fellow-beings, to be treated, one and all, with justice and sober reverence" (205). Eliot's remarks are interesting for what they reveal about her views on her own hom(m)o-sexual culture, but also for the light they may cast on the novel's title (*Romola* is the only Eliot novel to bear a woman's name). The word "Romola" does not exist in Italian except as a name for a hill outside Florence. Eliot adapted the word for her own purposes and told Alexander Main that she had based it on "Romolo," the "Italian equivalent of Romulus" (Eliot to Main, 3 Aug. 1871, *Letters* 4.174). In light of these facts, Romola's name might be linked not only to her epic role, as some critics have suggested,<sup>19</sup> but also to her position in the eyes of men as another phallic mother or "potent" Madonna. It is worth noting that just before introducing her translation of the passage about Romulus, Eliot complained about the type of woman "who is fit for nothing but to sit in her drawing-room like a doll-Madonna in her shrine" (205).

For many reasons, then, the Romulus association is contradictory and unstable as the sign of a woman's epic role. The name can refer not only to the positive side of the founding of Rome, but also to the circumstances of Romulus' birth and rise to power, a narrative of violent patriarchal struggle. Romulus, it should be remembered, was one of the twin sons of Rea Silvia, a woman whose uncle had appointed her as a Vestal Virgin so that she would not produce offspring who might usurp his power. Romulus' father, who seduced Rea Silvia, was Mars, the god of war and former patron of Florence. Romulus' founding of Rome was accomplished by murder and destruction, and his famous ploy to bring stability to the city was the rape of the Sabine women, who eventually defended their oppressors and effected an alliance between the Romans and the Sabine men (Tripp 513-17). This narrative, in which the idealized virgin is used to preserve male power, recalls Romola's position in Florence, where men call her "Madonna" and carry the Virgin in devout processions that celebrate their own hegemony. The vicious power struggles recall both the warring religious orders of Florence<sup>20</sup> and the history of Romola's own Bardi family, whose houses were sacked in the middle of the fourteenth century in retaliation for their grasping economic tactics. And the rape of the Sabine women evokes the position of Romola and the other women in the novel: in this hom(m)o-sexual culture, their bodies are objects that bond men.

Even the Comtean context of the novel brings into question the value of Romola's idealization in the plague-village scenes, for it is



here that she most resembles the Comtean banner of the young woman holding a male child. This secularized Madonna figure has a position in Comtean thinking very close to that of the Virgin Mary in Catholic doctrine: not as an image of female power, but as an object of inspiration for men.<sup>21</sup> As J. B. Bullen has pointed out, "Comte elevated the nineteenth-century view of the 'angelic' woman to the level of an important psychological principle. . . . The sympathetic, loving nature of woman would temper the driving intellectualism of men" (434). In Comte's scheme, this elevation of women made them unequal to men: private worship—of which the figures of mother, wife, and daughter were the objects—was possible for men only. Women were also excluded from the sacrament of Incorporation, which, as Martha S. Vogeler points out, was "performed seven years after death by a priest of Humanity to certify participation in the Great Being by men—women and useful animals being included as auxiliaries without benefit of sacrament" (75).<sup>22</sup>

If Romola's name and position as Madonna suggest both her elevation and her powerlessness, so too does the novel's Epilogue. She is, on the one hand, the head of a female family, and such a unit suggests the possibility of escaping the hom(m)o-sexual monopoly. The family members do, moreover, seem happier than heretofore: Monna Brigida is content to abandon the vulgar trappings she had worn to attract men now that she has Romola as a daughter and Tessa's children to replace her dead twins; Tessa and the children have for the first time a prosperous and stable life; and Romola herself, finally freed from Tito, has a fulfilling calling. These are some of the elements that have led Gillian Beer to call the ending of *Romola* a "too thorough comfort" (124-25).

The subversion associated with the gender plot is not absent from the novel's conclusion, however. Though Romola appears to be in a position of moral authority, she remains, as Homans has noted (196-97), the conduit of language rather than a user of it, as she passes on to Tito's son the learning she received from her father and instructs him in how to be the great statesman Petrarch had hoped would bring a new life to Italy. The reference to Petrarch is telling: Eliot had once made a note in her *Commonplace Book* about "Petrarch's contempt of women" (*Writer's Notebook* 56), and he is also the only non-classical writer admired by the misogynistic Bardo.<sup>23</sup> The reader will know, moreover, since the Medicis returned to power just three years after the novel's conclusion in 1509—the Epilogue is set eleven years after Romola's last return to Florence—that Romola's moral development

did not feminise the course of history in the way that the positivists thought the Religion of Humanity would: patriarchal values, if they had been threatened at all, were eventually restored to their dominant position. Neither does the future of the next generation appear to accord with the new values Romola has learned. Lillo sits near "the wide doorway that opened on to the loggia" (673) and entertains restless dreams of masculine power, while Ninna, who at the age of thirteen is at the brink of womanhood, sits in a "narrow inner room" (672) making wreaths for Savonarola's altar.<sup>24</sup>

It is significant, too, that the reference to Ninna's tending the altar follows immediately after the account in the previous chapter, entitled "The Last Silence," of Savonarola's execution and passage "into eternal silence." For, ironically, it has consistently been Savonarola's silence that has sustained his hypnotic influence after he has spoken. This effect is first described, in a passage added on the margin of the manuscript (2:43), in the chapter depicting Savonarola's address in the Duomo:

Savonarola's voice had been rising in impassioned force up to this point, when he became suddenly silent, let his hands fall and clasped them quietly before him. His silence, instead of being the signal for small movements amongst his audience, seemed to be as strong a spell to them as his voice. Through the vast area of the cathedral men and women sat with faces upturned, like breathing statues, till the voice was heard again in clear low tones. (292)

The mesmerism effected by this silence after speech also operates in the chapter where Savonarola persuades Romola to return to Florence, a chapter which ends with this sentence: "Savonarola stretched out his hands over her; but feeling would no longer pass through the channel of speech, and he was silent" (436). The power of Savonarola's silence over Romola then extends into the empty space between this chapter and the next, entitled "Coming Back," which begins with these words:

"Rise, my daughter," said Fra Girolamo at last. "Your servant is waiting not far off with the mules. It is time that I should go onward to Florence." Romola arose from her knees. That silent attitude had been a sort of sacrament to her, confirming the state of yearning passivity on which she had newly entered. (437)

Here the use of the phrase "at last," which requires the acknowledgement of a significant passage of time, indicates to the reader that a long silence has filled the space between the two chapters, during which Savonarola has stood with arms stretched over the kneeling Romola—

“confirming” his influence. For this reason, the similar contiguity of the chapter describing Savonarola’s “Last Silence” and of the Epilogue immediately following, with its references to his altar, implies not a permanent silencing, but its opposite: an “eternal” extension of his hypnotic power, made visible in the altar to his memory. Savonarola’s silence is the speaking voice of patriarchy.

In these terms, the Epilogue of *Romola* contains in its seemingly happy closure a radical negation of many of the expectations that the plot had generated. Here Ninna’s position is no different from that of Romola herself as she grew up in the shadow of her brother Dino—or, for that matter, from that of Maggie Tulliver. This repetition within Romola’s matriarchal family of the patriarchal power structure that fostered her own oppression thus denies the reader the satisfaction of any neatly teleological reading of the gender plot. The subordinate position of Ninna, whose mother had repeatedly lamented that neither Tito nor Romola was interested in her as they were in Lillo, remains in this novel—which speaks so eloquently for woman’s education—a troubling submissive presence. The conventional plot of human and historical progression reaches its predictable closure, but the desires constructed by the gender plot remain unsatisfied—muted by a silent patriarchal voice.

## NOTES

1. Holstrom and Lerner (65), Knoepfelmacher (62), and Levine (80) all praise Hutton’s review.
2. For a range of these teleological readings, see Ashton 51-54, Bullen, DeJong, Fleishman 149-63, Hardy, *Novels* 85-88, Levine, Myers, Paris 216-22, Rance 113-14, Sanders, *Introd. to Romola and The Victorian Historical Novel* 169-94, Sullivan, “Sketch,” Weisenfarth, *George Eliot’s Mythmaking* 147-69. Benson offers a Jungian and Emery (79-104) a Freudian reading of the plot. Dahl, DeLaura, Gezari, Greenstein, and Robinson criticize the novel for its lack of coherence or commitment to its own ideas. My interpretation is influenced by Shuttleworth’s (96-114), which suggests that *Romola* engages in a questioning dialogue with Comtean ideas.
3. I am influenced here by DuPlessis, who argues that in nineteenth-century fiction “successful quest and romance could not coexist and be integrated for the female protagonist at the resolution” (x). My point is that even when the romance plot has been suppressed for the fulfilment of the quest plot, as it is in *Romola*, there can be no satisfactory closure for the female protagonist because of the subversive operation of the gender plot.
4. This idea of “double reading” Eliot is influenced by Chase, Carpenter (30-31), and Homans (196).
5. It should be noted that the static quality of the emblematic picture is presented as a dynamic tension: in Romola’s face “pride and passion [seem] to be quivering in the balance with native refinement and intelligence” (95), and she must bite her lip “to prevent herself from starting” when her father lets his “massive prophylactic rings . . . fall a little too heavily” on her “delicate blue-veined” hand (99). The text that Romola is reading to her father, which

describes the blinding of Teiresias after he had "beheld Minerva unveiled" (94), is also charged with explosive content (see Homans 200-02).

6. Irigaray's idea is not unlike that of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who describes "an asymmetry in our present society between, on the one hand, the relatively continuous relation of female homosocial and homosexual bonds, and, on the other hand, the radically discontinuous relation of male homosocial and homosexual bonds" (4-5).
7. Goode (47) has also noticed the link between the barber shop scenes and the "exclusively male domain" of Florentine politics.
8. Bonaparte (86-109) discusses Tito's manipulation of two stories about Bacchus.
9. See Bullett 214, Conrad 127, Emery 79-80, Fleishman 159-60, Harvey 73, Hutton.
10. My reading conflicts with that of Butwin, who sees the celebration of the Pyramid of Vanities as a "perfect festival" (362).
11. Even Piero's seemingly misogynistic remarks, like those he makes to Romola in order to fend off her expressions of gratitude for his painting, seem a parodic version of the real misogyny found in men such as Nello, Tito, and Bardo. For a discussion of Piero's importance in the novel see Sullivan, "Piero di Cosimo and the Higher Primitivism in *Romola*."
12. See Beer 113-14 and Redinger 452.
13. Tito is not presented as undergoing the same painful process. When the first conflict with Romola emerges, he considers her still part of "that furniture of life which he shrank from parting with" (345), but he eventually decides, after she has "ceased to belong to the desirable furniture of his life" (494), to leave her. These passages recall Eliot's 1855 review, "Menander and Greek Comedy," in which she observes that Greek married women were not considered "a mere piece of furniture, or live stock, too insignificant to determine in any degree a man's happiness or misery" (251).
14. In the manuscript of *Romola* (2:296), the word "involuntarily" was added above the line.
15. My argument obviously conflicts with that of Roberts, who suggests that Romola's only reason for leaving Tito the first time, "apart from a vague sense of disappointment in her married life and a very faint suspicion about Baldassare, is that Tito has sold her father's library. . . . In fact Romola must appear to the reader at this moment as a woman who places rigid principle before affection" (124). Roberts echoes the earlier view of Oliphant, who disapproves of Romola's "denial of immortality in the affections" (79).
16. See also Fleishman 162, Harvey 236, Lerner 249, Myers 122, Poston 365, Rance 119.
17. It is interesting in this context that the chapter in *The Mill on the Floss* describing Maggie's decision to renounce Stephen Guest is entitled "Waking," while the chapter describing Romola's appearance in the plague-village is entitled "Romola's Waking." The intertextual relationship between the two novels is close and complex: they appear to form a dialogue about the predicaments of women in patriarchy.
18. In this context, it is significant that Eliot's only complaint to Frederic Leighton about his illustration of "The Blind Scholar and His Daughter" is that Bardo is not presented as if he were looking at Romola (Eliot to Leighton, [4? June 1862] *Letters* 4:40), though he cannot see her. Because she was a child when Bardo became blind, she is the only form in the room that he does not know in his mind's eye.
19. See Bonaparte (20) and Sanders, *Introd.* 29.
20. Wiesenfarth, *Introd.* xxvi, points out that the religious world in *Romola* "is a metonymy for the familial and political worlds" and that Eliot used her research from Pierre Helyot's *Histoire des ordres monastiques* "to intensify the sense of divisiveness that pervades the novel."
21. See also Sanders, *Victorian Historical Novel* 189, where he comments on a possible link between Eliot's use of Madonna imagery and the nineteenth-century interest in Catholic mariolatry fostered by the reported visions at Lourdes.
22. For more on women's subordinate position in the Comtean scheme, see Myers 120 and Shuttleworth 137-38.
23. Bonaparte (48) has also made this point.
24. Significantly, Ninna is presented in the manuscript as aged "fourteen or fifteen," and the word "narrow" used to describe her room was added above the line (3:309). The two rooms associated with Lillo and Ninna parallel the two that Tito and Romola inhabit after their marriage: his has "a sense of being in the sunny open air" (258), while hers is "long" and "narrow" and contains "two narrow windows" (259). See also Hardy, "The Moment of Disenchantment" 262-63, on the link in George Eliot between oppressive rooms and woman's narrow lot.

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