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## George Eliot's *Romola* and Its Shattered Ideals

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### Introduction

<1>George Eliot's *Romola* (1862-63) has invited various interpretations which examine what is often perceived as a discrepancy between the delicately described historical environment and the novel's "atemporal" protagonist. Eliot was at pains to depict the setting of the novel as accurately as possible, paying attention to the smallest details in speech and clothing. She succeeded in creating a novel which, most critics agree, successfully captures the cultural climate of its period – fifteenth-century Florentine life abounds with talk on the visual arts; the rebirth of classical scholarship is a prominent issue; the religious and political conflicts of this time are paid full attention.<sup>(1)</sup> Yet the protagonist, Romola, seems to be ill-suited to her historical period and not to fit into this environment: "She stands outside her milieu, rather than emerging from it" (Maitzen 104). The novel's main flaw is that its protagonist transgresses the limitations defined by chronology and genre. Romola is more than a young woman living in Renaissance Florence since she transcends the specific conditions of her historical context. On her anachronistic character numerous critics agree: Romola has been identified as a learned woman or female intellectual (David 177-196; Simpson), a feminist heroine (Paxton, "Feminism and Positivism"), a Madonna figure (VanEsfeld 164-195), a forerunner of Victorian social reformers (Booth 110-34), as an apocalyptic figure (Carpenter) and most prominently, as will be shown below, as a Positivist figure. A Positivist reading of the novel decodes Romola's life and development as a microcosmic embodiment of the three stages which Auguste Comte assigned to the development of mankind – from Polytheism, to Monotheism to the then final stage of Positivism.

<2>This article suggests a reading of *Romola* which overlaps with some of the aforementioned interpretations. It foregrounds Eliot's deconstruction of what could be called patterns of idealisation in the novel. Without submitting *Romola* to a deconstructive reading, it will be argued that *Romola* is a deconstructive novel in the basic sense of the word. Jonathan Culler's definition of a deconstructive text is a text which "undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies, by identifying in the text the rhetorical operations that produce the supposed ground of argument, the key concept or premise" (86). *Romola* dismantles itself: its action follows established narrative pathways (e.g. the heroine's flight from her environment, her "lesson" or conversion, her return to the old, albeit changed, structures), but corrodes the psychological patterns which lie beneath them. Idealization and emotions such as trust, belief and admiration are represented as highly subjective processes and as the source of repeated disillusionment. *Romola* suggests that the roots of idealisation processes lie in cultural, literary, mythological and religious traditions. Clothed in the form of a literary convention or mode, as it can be found most remarkably in the poetry of Troubadour or *dolce stile nuovo* poets, idealization proves to be a burden for Romola. A preconceived pattern for the organization of romantic love, it is oppressive and needs to be discarded by the protagonist for the sake of her development. However, Eliot's depiction of these patterns of idealization is ambiguous: while she is concerned with the failure of idealization and its impracticability in "real life", she constantly introduces these patterns to her narration, and implies that they determine her protagonist's life and that of others. Idealization, *Romola* suggests, can be based on delusion and can even be harmful, but it is represented as an unavoidable and even necessary characteristic of private (and social) relationships. Eliot's critical awareness of idealization as ambiguous expresses itself in the ways by which she revises the social and cultural ties, the patterns of idealization which are Romola's doom throughout the novel. These patterns are not only grounded in medieval and Renaissance literary traditions, but they also reflect a discourse on Victorian ideals of femininity: Eliot depicts Romola not only as a Renaissance Beatrice figure, but also as a dutiful daughter, well-educated girl, devoted wife, charitable woman of faith, philanthropic carer and loving

mother. The underlying tenor is one of scepticism towards all these roles which stem from processes of idealisation. By looking at Romola as a Beatrice figure, the full poignancy of her dilemma – the idealist burden she carries conflicting with the historical specificity of her conditions – becomes clear.

### **Romola: Italy, Dante and Beatrice**

<3>*Romola* is Eliot's only truly historical novel. It is set in the distant past, the late fifteenth century, and in a remote setting, Florence. *Romola* is a very learned novel including many references to mythology, the visual arts, the political situation of Renaissance Florence and its history. Dante, the poetry of the *dolce stile nuovo*, and the Troubadour tradition are a perceptible presence. The Italian theme in *Romola* is very strong, which is unsurprising given Eliot's love for that country, its language and literature, and the production process of the novel. George Eliot's contact with Italian life and culture stirred her imagination; her strong sympathy for and emotional engagement with the country and its, at that time, insecure political future are well-known (Thompson, *Eliot and Italy* 30-49: 49). Eliot travelled to Italy several times, spending a total of six months in Italy. Not only did she learn the language (she started learning Italian in 1839), she also developed a strong interest in the contemporary political situation in Italy and was familiar with its music and visual arts. Even though it is impossible to establish when exactly Eliot first read Dante, we can presume that Dante had a firm grip on her imagination from 1860 onwards. Her later novels such as *Middlemarch*, *Daniel Deronda* and *Felix Holt* contain a remarkable number of Dantean references which appear in various forms (parallel scenes, echoes, paraphrase, direct quotations) and which contribute in several ways to the novels' structures (Thompson, "Dante and George Eliot" 199). We can also assume that she continued her reading of Dante over the years, especially in the late 1870s. Her relationship with James Cross was infused with their shared appreciation of Dante – she famously signed a letter to him "Beatrice" (*GEL* VII 211-12).

<4>As Andrew Thompson's overview of Dantean references in Eliot's work ("George Eliot's Borrowings") makes clear, Eliot valued the *Commedia* above the *Vita Nuova*. Thus there is only one direct quotation to be found from the *Vita Nuova*, which is used as an epigraph to chapter 54 of *Middlemarch*, the sonnet from the *Vita Nuova* section XXI entitled "Negli occhi porta la mia donna Amore". Eliot mentions the *Vita Nuova* only once in her diaries, as part of her reading in August 1868 (Thompson, "George Eliot's Borrowings" 27-28 and n10). This, however, does not rule out an earlier reading of Dante's sonnets or general reading of Dante, even though her letters and diaries do not comment on the *Vita Nuova* before 1868. The Eliot-Lewes-Library-Catalogue mentions a copy of Dante's *Vita Nuova* as part of his *Opere Minori* published in 1856-57, yet it is not a comprehensive or reliable source when analyzing Eliot's knowledge of Dante or finding reliable dates for her readings.(2) In 1861, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's translation of the *Vita Nuova*, included in his translation of other Italian poets called *Early Italian Poets*, was published and Eliot was offered a copy as a present by George Smith in July 1862 (*GEL* IV 48). It is highly improbable that she would not have been at least familiar with the content of the *Vita Nuova* by the time she was writing *Romola*. Not only did she spend a considerable amount of time in 1860 and 1861 roaming the streets of Florence and its many bookshops, but she would also have at least heard of Dante's love for Beatrice, after all Lewes was a great *connoisseur* of Italian culture and literature.(3) We know that Eliot read some of the *Inferno* and reread *Purgatorio* in Italian between autumn 1862 and January 1863 as she was working on *Romola* (Thompson, *George Eliot and Italy* 27), and it is probable that she would have needed knowledge of the *Vita Nuova* to fully comprehend Beatrice's significance especially in *Purgatorio*.

<5>In *Romola*, the total number of direct references to Dante, in the form of quotations from his works or allusions to his person, is limited, and his presence in the novel is less immediately perceptible than one could expect given the firm alliance of the city of Florence with his life and works and Eliot's heavy use of Dantean images in her other texts (Thompson, *Eliot and Italy* 84-97). Yet despite the relatively small number of readily identifiable references in the novel, Eliot's engagement with Dante's works is intense. It manifests itself subtly, as for example in the Proem, where Eliot creates a threefold connection between the narrator's presence, the Renaissance and medieval Italy. The narrator's transgression of temporal and spatial frontiers resembles that of Dante (who returns safely from the underworld and vertically traverses the globe) and turns the narrator into a figure associated with the timeless quality of Dante's epic. As the highly self-conscious Proem suggests, *Romola* partakes in a great tradition of epic story-telling and romantic love poetry. Homer, Virgil and Dante, who are all mentioned in *Romola*, produced world visions, and Eliot tried to follow on this grand epic tradition. Similarly to Dante (the *Commedia* contains

numerous descriptive details of place and time), Eliot describes a precise topographical and temporal setting in order to then transcend the worldly frame. Dante is a threefold authority: epic, historical and moral. He helps to authenticate the historical context Eliot creates: Dante's time is conjured up to round off the historical account of Renaissance Florence which, in addition, sheds a light on mid-nineteenth-century Italian politics. Dante also lends a moral perspective to the action and the characters, even if his recognition as a moral authority implies subtler means of representation and certainly requires a thorough knowledge of the *Commedia* from the reader. Firstly, there is a wide range of correspondences between Eliot's depiction of Tito's moral decline and Dante's catalogue of sins. In the *Commedia*, Dante elaborates a detailed system of sins in which treason is established as the gravest transgression. Dante depicts various forms of treason and their punishment. The deeper he descends into hell, the graver are the sins that were committed and the more severe is their punishment. Similarly, Eliot carefully unfolds Tito's gradual moral descent, his constant move down a spiral of corruption. Secondly, Eliot's moral stance is that of a humanist, favouring self-abnegation and renunciation for the sake of the general good. The subordination of individual needs and desires to humanity's sake is a recurrent theme in her novels and the process of self-refinement and painful learning bears certain similarities to Dante's notion of purgatorial rectification. The connection between Dante's and Eliot's notion of moral growth and refinement is obvious and identifiable not only in *Romola*, but also in *Middlemarch*, *Daniel Deronda* and *Felix Holt*.

<6>The strongest Dantean element in the novel, however, is the protagonist, who is modelled on the figure of Dante's Beatrice. There is a web of allusions and use of codes to describe the type of femininity embodied by Beatrice and Romola. The intertextual techniques which Eliot uses to model her heroine upon Beatrice are subtle and indirect. Eliot does not identify Romola explicitly as a Beatrice figure, yet she uses codes to spin a web of parallels which the knowledgeable reader is able to decipher. These codes refer to both Romola's and Beatrice's physical appearance and the effect it has on the beholder, to the feelings these women inspire in those meeting them, and more generally to the type of redemptive femininity which Beatrice and Romola exemplify. Like Beatrice, Romola is a Florentine lady who is renowned and admired for her beauty.<sup>(4)</sup> Beatrice, to recapitulate, figures most prominently in Dante's love poetry of the *Vita Nuova*, and in the *Commedia*, where she is one of his guides on his journey to Paradise. In the *Vita Nuova*, he meets her when he is nine and she is eight years old. He retrospectively realises that he fell in love with her at this particular moment of time. From this first encounter onwards he keeps thinking of her as angelic, noble, praise-worthy and endowed with divine qualities. Her early death leaves him overcome with grief and writing poetry in her honour. His otherworldly encounter with her is described in the latter parts of the *Commedia*. When she appears to him in the Earthly Paradise, she has kept all her earthly, physical charms, but shows both her moral and intellectual superiority to Dante by scolding him for his misdeeds and by interpreting difficult theological questions for him.

<7>Romola is repeatedly described as beautiful, but also as majestic and queenly, the use of the latter anticipating the concept of "queenliness" which has been identified as characteristic of Dorothea Brooke (Maitzen 135-60): "Romola walked [...], with the queenly step which was the simple action of her tall, finely wrought-frame, without the slightest conscious adjustment of herself" (49). Another example is the following passage: "But as he [Tito] imagined her coming towards him in her radiant beauty, made so lovably mortal by her soft hazel eyes, he fell into wishing that she had been something lower" (174). Similarly, in the *Vita Nuova* Beatrice is praised for her outstanding beauty which causes admiration and delight in every beholder. Walking in the streets of Florence, her ravishing appearance turns her into a miracle and "brings sweetness to the heart" (see the sonnet "So deeply to be revered, so fair" in section XXVI of Dante's *Vita Nuova* 76). Her presence has a purgatorial effect on the beholder, "for as she goes her way / A chill is in evil hearts by Love is driven, causing all hearts to freeze and perish there" (section XIX of the *Vita Nuova* 56).

<8>Throughout the novel Romola's beauty is associated with moral goodness, intelligence and ideal femininity. In the following passage, her affinity to these traditional types of ideal femininity is made through an explicit intertextual reference:

For it was pleasant to look at Romola's beauty; to see her, like old Firenzuola's type of womanly majesty, 'sitting with a certain grandeur, speaking with gravity, smiling with modesty, and casting around, as it were, an odour of queenliness;' and she seemed to unfold like a strong white lily under this genial breath of admiration and homage: it was all one to her with her new bright life in Tito's love. (189)

Romola's character is said to gain its exquisiteness from a fusion of purity, morality, seriousness, and female receptivity to love. She embodies the kind of neo-Platonic ideal of femininity which was based on a fusion of feminine beauty and moral goodness, an ideal praised by poets and writers such as Marsilio Ficino, one of the most important translators of Plato's works in the Renaissance. Romola's looks reflect an ideal of female beauty characteristic of Renaissance female portraiture with its penchant for long necks, golden hair, pearly white skin, blue eyes and rosy lips – an ideal which derived from the literary models of Dante and Petrarch and works such as Agnolo Firenzuola's *Dialogo Delle Bellezze Delle Donne* (1548).<sup>(5)</sup>

<9>The two features most often referred to are Romola's eyes and her voice. In this respect, too, she resembles Beatrice, whose eyes remain a constant point of reassurance during the poet's journey to Paradise (e.g. *Paradiso* XXII l. 154; *Paradiso* XXIII). Besides, in the *Vita Nuova*, Beatrice's eyes are said to have a purifying effect on people, as for example in the opening lines of the sonnet in section XXI: "Love is encompassed in my Lady's eyes / Whence she ennobles all she looks upon" (60). Her voice, on the other hand, is heard for the first time in the Earthly Paradise (*Purgatorio* XXX), when she is still wearing her veil. Beatrice addresses Dante, queenly and imperatively, reciting his earthly misdeeds. Dante starts to weep, whilst Beatrice finishes her accusations. In *Romola*, the protagonist's soft hazel eyes are repeatedly referred to in conjunction with her noble nature ("all the tenderness that spoke in her clear eyes" 129); when Tito's mistress Tessa meets her for the first time, she has just fallen prey to the boys ransacking jewellery for Savonarola's Bonfire of Vanities. She is torn out of her reverie on the beauty and purity of the Virgin Mary when "suddenly a gentle hand was laid on her arm, and a soft, wonderful voice, as if the Holy Madonna were speaking, said, 'Do not be afraid; no one shall harm you.'" (430). Romola's saint-like, unworldly appearance is epitomised in the description of her wedding day when she exhibits a radiant beauty,

[...] all white and gold, more than ever like a tall lily. Her white silk garment was bound by a golden girdle, which fell with large tassels; and above that was the rippling gold of her hair, surmounted by the white mist of her long veil, [...]. (197)

She is repeatedly called a "(Florentine) lily" (39, 139, 394), a meaningful description offering manifold interpretations: the lily is both the symbol of the city of Florence and a symbol of female purity, usually in the context of Marian iconography. But it is also a major metaphor in John Ruskin's 1864 lecture "Of Queen's Gardens" in *Sesame & Lilies*, which reflects his ideal of the Victorian wife and mother, and introduces Dante's Beatrice as a model of virtuous femininity (54).

<10>Romola's nature is merciful, circumspect and loyal. Because of her benign nature and her beneficial influence Romola is perceived as a saint, Mary figure or saviour. She selflessly tends the sick in Florence, is committed to saving her godfather from punishment and bestows her greatest care on her father, who praises her exalted character and unique virtues, thereby aligning her in a long literary tradition of idealized femininity:

For thou art not like the herd of thy sex: thou art such a woman as the immortal poets had a vision of when they sang the lives of the heroes – tender but strong, like thy voice, which has been to me instead of the light in the years of my blindness. (128)

This reference to "the poets" is not only explicit, it is also self-reflexive in that it positions the novel's protagonist within a literary tradition whose basic strategies of idealization the novel critically revises. Romola's father summarises in a few words the *crux* of his daughter's fate. A similar example is Tito's arrival which had been anticipated by Romola's poetic reading experience, but never sincerely expected by her: "The poets", and that is those of the *dolce stile nuovo*, had given her an idea of love, but she had "never dreamed that anything like that could happen to [her] here in Florence in [their] old library" (178). Early in their relationship there is a rare moment of mutual idealization at its peak, presenting Romola as Tito's "goddess" and him being in "paradise" (175) and culminating in a highly aesthetic *tableau* of their embrace, "she with her long white hands of dark-brown curls, and he with his dark fingers bathed in the streaming gold. Each was so beautiful to the other; each was experiencing that undisturbed mutual consciousness for the first time" (175). However, Romola's initial image of Tito as that of "the warm stream of hope and gladness" (175) and "sun-god" (177) is soon clouded.

### Gender Ideals in *Romola*

<11>Romola, as a Beatrice figure, resembles other mythical heroines who came to life in the nineteenth century and who perpetuated “a series of chivalrous ideals of feminine perfection –

Laura, Beatrice, the Lady of Shalott, the Lady with the Lamp – a series eventually building to a tradition of great women” (Booth 112). Eliot repeatedly takes recourse to mythological, religious or literary female figures when describing her characters, as if she was searching for authoritative, founding legends: “Every narrative, Eliot seems to be saying, needs a founding legend to lend provisional legitimacy to the accidents it records” (Winnett 123). The allusion to St Theresa at the opening of *Middlemarch* (1871-72) and the subsequent parallels between Dorothea Brooks and this saint are a well-known example. Such comparisons endow her female characters with an aura of spiritual grandeur, thereby consolidating their significance within their narrative universe: “It is as though the only discourse which George Eliot can trust when she seeks to express the vision of woman coming to authority is that of the saint’s legend” (Beer 123). The reason is that while lending authority and credibility to her heroines by establishing cross-references to a cultural tradition, Eliot simultaneously produces a clash of conflicting strains imposed on her characters. She conjures up the respective religious, mythological or literary backgrounds of each of these models. At the same time she points out the mechanisms of suppression and limitation her heroines are subjected to in “real” life, as opposed to that of poetic imagination. The moulding of her female characters according to these ideals is a reductive measure, despite the monumental aura which they inspire, limiting these women according to preconceived, standardised rules of representation.

<12>In *Romola*, Eliot negotiates this tension between a female individual and the stifling grip of culturally and/or literarily motivated idealisation and has her protagonist’s development depend on it. In the novel, fathers, lovers, husbands, but also abstract authorities such as religious and social ideologies tend to misinterpret, abuse or limit the potential and liberty of the woman whom they idealise. The protagonist is granted certain educational privileges by her father, but at the same time her development is limited because of her sex. Bardo repeatedly mentions how badly he lacks male assistance for his work, because “the sustained zeal and unconquerable patience” asked of those involved with a scholarly project “are still less reconcilable with the wandering, vagrant propensity of the feminine mind than with the feeble powers of the feminine body” (51). Women’s potential and its repression through male forces is a constant theme in Eliot’s novels, even though it is often accompanied by the idea that it can only be discovered and promoted by a man’s interference. Thus in *Romola*, the protagonist’s abilities seem not to have been developed fruitfully yet, since she “had had contact with no mind that could stir the larger possibilities of her nature; they lay folded and crushed like embryonic wings, making no element in her consciousness beyond an occasional vague uneasiness” (246). Romola wants to break away from the confinement of the city walls and her oppressive political and private situation, but she also needs to break away from a male, patriarchal cultural tradition.<sup>(6)</sup> Like Beatrice, Romola is bound to Florence, but her development reflects a changing relationship with the city. This is made clear indirectly by Savonarola, who keeps her from leaving the city and warns her of the consequences of breaking with the past: “Then, since that tie is snapped, you are without a law, without religion: you are no better than a beast of the field when she is robbed of her young” (359).<sup>(7)</sup> Eliot is eager to dissolve this connection, to free her protagonist from the city and the prescriptive images of selflessness and humility associated with the Virgin Mother and Beatrice. However, Romola’s escape from Florence, her shipwreck, her awakening on a peninsula, and her eventual, one could argue anti-climactic, return to the domestic hearth in the unusual social position of a matriarch, have traditionally not been seen favourably by the critics. This breach of realist conventions and the sharp contrast this development offers in comparison to the early descriptions of Florence in the novel have been deplored as the illegible “blot” in Eliot’s novel. In recent approaches to the novel, this rupture has become the main point of interest because of the multitude of interpretations it permits, proving that “the faultline has ceased to be faulty, and has become instead intriguing, revealing and pivotal” (Levine/Turner 1-13:10).

<13>Romola’s failure as an idealized Beatrice figure becomes clearest when her dysfunctional marriage with Tito is considered. Initially Romola seems to be the perfect match for him. The love Tito feels for her initially is identified with his “larger self” (151), thus with an ideal aspect of his character towards which, however, he is unable to aspire. She seems to be a promise of a greater potential residing in his life, exerting a Beatrician effect on him:

[...] there was no woman in all Florence like Romola. When she was near him, and looked at him with her sincere hazel eyes, he was subdued by a delicious influence as

strong and inevitable as those musical vibrations which take possession of us with a rhythmic empire that no sooner ceases than we desire it to begin. (118)

Yet she gradually loses her appeal: Tito fears that “behind her frank eyes there was a nature that could judge him, and that any ill-founded trust of hers sprang not from pretty brute-like incapacity, but from a nobleness which might prove an alarming touchstone” (301). The more deeply Tito gets involved in crime, the more his love and admiration are mingled with feelings of guilt and inferiority. In the course of the novel, guilt-ridden Tito’s love for Romola is replaced by fear of condemnation. She belongs to the “furniture” of his ideal life, but he “wincing under her judgment” (276). Romola’s virtuosity is being described as double-faced: attractive and intimidating. After he has sold her father’s library and thus committed a major breach of trust, Tito undergoes Romola’s interrogation:

At first, Tito felt horribly cowed; it seemed to him that the disgrace he had been dreading would be worse than he had imagined it. But soon there was a reaction: such power of dislike and resistance as there was within him was beginning to rise against a wife whose voice seemed like the herald of a retributive fate. (286)

Tito starts to perceive Romola as his external conscience. Romola is showing him her “other face,” and by doing so she resembles Beatrice, who, on her first meeting with Dante in *Purgatorio* XXX reveals her reprimanding facet. In *Romola* Eliot is mainly concerned with female moral superiority: whereas male characters experience moral refinement and painful learning processes in, for example, *Middlemarch*, *Romola* is sceptical of such a possibility. The connection between moral issues and the novel’s gender politics crystallises in a particular point, namely the destabilisation of power relations between man and woman, a process which results from a moral and intellectual imbalance between the two. Female moral superiority is double-faced in *Romola*, perceived as attractive and repellent at the same time, and Eliot’s message seems to be that a woman’s moral and/or intellectual superiority is hardly compatible with a patriarchal social system. It is at this point that Eliot provocatively goes beyond Dante, questioning the practicability of his idealised vision of love. By adopting the viewpoint of an idealised woman, by giving her a voice, the novel suggests that any such attempt of putting theory into practice is doomed to failure and leads to mutual disenchantment. This is not dissimilar to Christina Rossetti’s endeavour in “Monna Innominata” (1881) where the speaker, another Beatrice, is empowered with speech and points out the deficiencies inherent in the traditional, one-sided representation of romantic love in Troubadour poetry.

<14>Tito is an inadequate partner for Romola and the repulsion which he increasingly feels for her stems from his awareness of his unbridgeable inferiority.<sup>(8)</sup> The contrast which Eliot creates between Romola and her husband could not be starker. *Romola* presents the fascinating portrayal of Tito’s moral decline, drawing him gradually deeper into a self-perpetuating system of lies and treachery. Tito’s downward spiral automatically conjures up the visual idea of a moral descent, the topography of which was provided by Dante’s *Commedia*. A strong Dantean image, yet only recognisable for a reader familiar with Dante’s text, is the fatal embrace of Tito and his patron

Baldassare, the latter driven by the desire “to die with his hold on this body” and to “follow the traitor to hell that he might clutch him there” (548). Tito’s final punishment comes in the form of a *contrapasso*; the deadly embrace of Baldassare unites the traitor and his victim. It vividly recalls the final posture of Count Ugolino and the treacherous bishop Ruggiero, at whose head Ugolino gnaws while they are stuck in the frozen lake of Cocytus (*Inferno* XXXIII).

<15>Eliot exacerbates the moral conflict between the two spouses by introducing the peasant girl Tessa, the “other woman”, with whom Tito begins a clandestine relationship, starting with a sham wedding and resulting in two children. Whereas Romola remains childless, Tessa bears Tito’s offspring and offers him an alternative home, “a refuge from the threatened isolation that would come with disgrace” (145). Tito’s encounters with Tessa are mainly physical and Tito wonders “when Romola will kiss [his] cheek in that way?” (111). Tessa embodies a different type of womanhood compared to Romola’s excessive beauty, elegance, education and moral charm. When Tito meets her first, he is attracted by her large blue eyes and her child-like face. Tessa is a woman who is neither demanding nor questioning, “a creature who was without moral judgments that could condemn him, whose little loving ignorant soul made a world apart, where he might feel in freedom from suspicions and exacting demands” (145). Tito is not in love with Tessa, but with Romola “whose presence possessed him so that the simple sweep of her long tresses across his cheek seemed to vibrate through the hours” (299). Tito’s relationship with Tessa brutally parodies Dante’s invention of the so-called screen ladies and his affection for the mysterious

“*donna gentile*,” the woman at the window whom he meets one year after Beatrice’s death. Thus, Romola is not the only one to fall prey to Tito, “who made almost every one fond of him, for he was young and clever, and beautiful, and his manners to all were gentle and kind” (583). He possesses the allure of a semi-God in the eyes of one person, Tessa. Naïve as she may be by nature, she is also kept in complete ignorance about her “husband’s” public identity. After Tito has rescued her from the hands of a conjurer in the streets of Florence, she regards him as her saviour, as a heavenly messenger who is in charge of her:

He had impressed her too differently from any human being who had ever come near her before, for her to make any comparison of details; she took no note of his dress; he was simply a voice and a face to her, something come from paradise into a world where most things seem hard and angry; and she prattled with as little restraint as if he had been an imaginary companion born of her own lovingness and the sunshine.  
(107)

As her saviour Tito assumes traits of a male Beatrice figure: he is a ray of light, whose bodily form matters less than his heavenly voice and his beautiful face. For Tessa, beauty is a sign of extraordinary virtue. Tito asks her at an earlier point why she feels so safe with him and her response is that it is because of his beauty – “like the people in Paradise; they are all good” (106). The irony created by the girl’s innocent perception of Tito does not pass unnoticed since the reader knows about his secret doings. Seen from the novel’s perspective on the inherent problems of *female* idealisation, this passage and the language used make clear that Tessa’s notion of Tito as heroic guardian angel is subjective, as is the whole phenomenon of idealisation. Tito is as easily transformed into a Beatrice in Tessa’s eyes as Romola is in his, regardless of his sex or his actual merits. His angelic quality is his defining feature for Tessa who thinks of him as “much more beautiful than the Archangel Michael, who was so mighty and so good that he lived with the Madonna and all the saints and was prayed to along with them” (145). Again this very explicit comparison to one of the highest angels in the Divine Hierarchy creates a certain irony by forming a contrast with the other side of Tito’s character. After all he refers to himself as the “Great Tempter” (178). The versatility of his facial expression is most clearly seen by Piero di Cosimo, the painter, when he states that

a perfect traitor should have a face which vice can write no marks on – lips that will lie with a dimpled smile – eyes of such agate-like brightness and depth that no infamy can dull them – cheeks that will rise from a murder and not look haggard.  
(42)

Or, as the narrator remarks with respect to Tessa’s stupefaction when faced with Tito’s stunning beauty, “was it that Tito’s face attracted or repelled according to the mental attitude of the observer? Was it a cipher more than one key?” (102). Tessa’s blind trust in his moral integrity goes to prove that not only beauty, but also virtue seems to lie in the eye of the beholder, and that the seductive power of the ideal often resides in its persuasive force.

### ***Romola’s Critique of Idealization***

<16>The inescapable pattern of idealization and disenchantment is mirrored and commented upon elsewhere in the novel, as for example in Savonarola’s spell-binding appearance and Romola’s eventual disillusionment. However, what seems to be the gravest conclusion that the novel draws is that there is no end to idealization. Romola, once she has made her escape from Florence, from the men in her life and the cultural and social ties imposed on her, wakes up and finds herself in a plague-stricken village. For Romola “a new life” begins here. Her waking up on unknown shores is like a second baptism. What could be seen as favourable conditions under which she can eventually free herself from the expectations imposed on her in Florence leads to further instances of idealization. She takes care of a Jewish baby, the only survivor of the pestilence. The other non-Jewish inhabitants are bewildered by her presence and regard her as a superhuman being, a selfless and self-sacrificing Madonna. Romola may abandon old beliefs and principles, but replaces them with new ones. Her actions are no longer dictated by patriarchal dogmatism. She turns means into ends by adopting the positivist creed that the only sure thing in life is the suffering of others which needs to be cured. The alleviation of other people’s pain is salvation and no longer a means of reaching it: “[...] – she had simply lived, with so energetic an impulse to share the life around her, to answer the call of need and do the work which cried aloud to be done, [...]” (560). Romola has now come to embody a kind of female virtuousness which frees her from metaphysical, marital or familial bonds:

All that ardour of her nature which could no longer spend itself in the woman's tenderness for father and husband, had transformed itself into an enthusiasm of sympathy with the general life. She had ceased to think that her own lot could be happy – had ceased to think of happiness at all: the one end of her life seemed to her to be the diminishing of sorrow. (388)

However, her new identity as an altruistic benefactor can still be interpreted as following an ideology. There are numerous Victorian novels, particularly from the mid-century and often inspired by historical philanthropic women, dealing with female characters who are dissatisfied with their status as queens of their domestic realms and their function as mothers and wives, and who are keen to bestow their energies on the public. The (noble) philanthropic heroine became a literary convention, and her literary representations, it has been argued, had an impact on the way female readers perceived their own situation, sometimes creating the desire to follow these literary models and to leave the private sphere for the sake of their public activities (Elliott 26).

<17>The above passage explains why many readings of *Romola* put the novel in a Positivist light, arguing that it follows the philosophy of Auguste Comte.(9) Comte tried to establish Positivism as a formally constituted religious system in which the worship of God was to be replaced with that of Humanity, which is best represented in the image of the Virgin Mary.

According to this scheme, classical Polytheism determines Romola's youth. She spends her time studying classical literature with her father. Tito's appearance introduces the jovial, sensual aspect of the classical era, the satyrs and maenads, wine and concupiscence; Romola becomes Ariadne, Tito is Bacchus.(10) Romola's second, monotheistic stage begins with the gradual disenchantment she experiences in her marriage and culminates in her submission to Savonarola's instructions which she receives on her first journey out of Florence. The third, positivist stage finally coincides with the latter part of Book Three, Romola's altruistic turn, as described above. Within the context of Romola's stay in this deserted village there is one particular passage which comments in more general terms on the genesis of mythic tales, by describing how Romola remains a legend for the villagers. After her departure from the island, a legend is born of a woman who "had done beautiful loving deeds there, rescuing those who were ready to perish" (559):

Every day the *padre* and Jacopo and the small flock of surviving villagers paid their visit to this cottage to see the Blessed Lady, and to bring her of their best as an offering – [...]. It was a sight they could none of them forget, a sight they all told of in their old age – how the sweet and sainted lady with her fair face, her golden hair, and her brown eyes that had a blessing in them, lay weary with her labours after she had been sent over the sea to help them in their extremity, and how the queer little Benedetto used to crawl about the straw by her side and want everything that was brought to her, and she always gave him a bit of what she took, and told them if they loved her they must be good to Benedetto. (558-559)

This short passage is revelatory since it describes the basic ingredients of myth-making in a nutshell. While Romola left Florence because she could not live any longer under the cultural burden and expectations imposed on her by her patriarchal environment, and because her own erotic and religious ideals were shattered, she remains unable to break these patterns of idealisation. She will be turned into a legend again, and will be memorised by this community as a benefactor: her story will become part of an oral tradition.

<18>After her return to Florence, Romola stands on her own. Bardo, Bernardo, Dino, Tito and Savonarola, the men who had determined her life, are dead; her father's intellectual and material legacy is lost. She is surrounded by her newly created family of choice: Tessa, the fallen woman, Tessa's two children fathered by Tito, and Monna Brigida, her cousin. Yet she seems to be detached from those around her, inhabiting a separate and tranquil sphere of wisdom and experience: "An eager life had left its marks upon her: the finely-moulded cheek had sunk a little, the golden crown was less massive; but there was a placidity in Romola's face which had never belonged to it in youth" (581). Romola remains an ideological product even at the end of the novel, this time one of the Victorian etiological quest. A first clue to this ultimate role is hinted at earlier in the novel, when Tito feels confronted with a more "primordial" female presence, tentatively described as a "great nature-goddess," unexplainable in rational terms. It is then that Tito

felt for the first time. without defining it to himself. that loving awe in the presence of

noble womanhood, which is perhaps something like the worship paid of old to a great nature-goddess, who was not all-knowing, but whose life and power were something deeper and more primordial than knowledge. (95)

Romola is perceived as a primeval, pre-historical force at the heart of Christian, Western myths and legends. As Sally Shuttleworth has argued, Tito's indefinable awe mirrors currents of secularised nineteenth-century philosophy, Positivism being one of them, which searched for an elementary female power anticipating and embodying the principles of maternal vitality which the Virgin Mary symbolises (105). In its reiteration of idealisation processes, *Romola* repeatedly creates a historically conditioned vocabulary for a constant vision of a female representative of the divine – prevalent in pagan religions, emerging again in Catholicism as well as in secularised systems of faith.

<19>Romola's return to the domestic hearth, her decision to adopt Tito's illegitimate children and to take care of Tessa could be read as an anti-climactic ending to a story tentatively exploring the possibilities of unleashed female potential. This situation is not dissimilar to the ending of *Middlemarch*, where Dorothea Brooke eventually abandons her financially secured widowhood and independence in favour of a second marriage. The ending of *Romola*'s can be seen from different perspectives. It could be read as a regressive step leading the protagonist back to previously critically assessed social and familial models. Romola, it could be argued, breaks away from urban, religious, social and private constraints, but then returns because she cannot live out her vision of a woman-dominated world set apart from male civilization and culture (Paxton 75). As Gillian Beer states, George Eliot ultimately values "interdependence" over "independence" (14). The ending reintegrates the individual within her social context and places humanistic interests above worldly, material concerns. There is the possibility to read the ending in a more positive light: the novel's affirmation of an alternative feminist model of social organisation apart from that of the nuclear family could be seen as a redemptive feature. *Romola* illustrates the inevitability of idealisation in relationships, but also its function as an instrument helping human beings to understand and deal with experiences which affect them deeply. Yet it does not leave the applicability and survivability of such ideals unquestioned. *Romola* lays bare the oppressiveness of the poetic burdens imposed on women cast into the roles of a Beatrice or Laura, or that of Christina Rossetti's nameless women. Like Rossetti, Eliot is aware of the ultimate failure of attempts to transfer these poetic modes into the complexities of life. But more importantly, the novel's lack of resolution at the end becomes excusable and even explainable if its engagement with the psychological patterns of idealisation, their unavoidable, yet objectionable recurrence, is brought to the fore. Romola's struggle is that between self-definition and idealization in the public and private realm, and it remains unsettled.

#### Endnotes

(1)The notebook which Eliot used while researching *Romola* is full of notes on Florentine and Italian history, descriptions of buildings such as San Marco, Italian names, transport and clothing habits, see MSS 40768, "Florentine Notes", held in the British Library.(^)

(2)See Baker's list of the Eliot/Lewes library. Library item 532 is Dante Alighieri. *Opere minori*. Annotati da Pietro Fraticelli. 3 vols. Firenze, 1856-57. There are only two further titles mentioned in the catalogue: An edition of the *Commedia* translated by John Dayman, 1865; Cesare Balbo. *Vita di Dante*. Firenze, 1853, and Antoine Frédéric Ozmanam. *Dante et la philosophie catholique au treizième siècle*, 1847.(^)

(3)The *George Eliot Letters (GEL)* contain several references to Eliot's and Lewes' book purchases: see vol. III, 412, 414, 417.(^)

(4)Her full name, Romola dei Bardi, suggests descent from the historical Beatrice Portinari, who became the wife of Simone dei Bardi.(^)

(5)See Ames-Lewis/Rogers for an overview of Renaissance concepts of female beauty.(^)

(6)See Paxton and Homans (189-222). Homans claims that the Florentine Renaissance was the time when those cultural myths were born which would determine and limit women's position in Victorian England. She argues that Romola is docile to the words of the men in her life and firmly placed within the rigid structure of cultural and verbal transmission within a patriarchal system.

(△)

(7) A quick glance at historical studies dealing with the situation of women in Renaissance Florence suggests that Eliot took liberties when allowing her heroine to radically break with her duties as a female citizen of Florence and to return as head of her own household. The restraints imposed on women in the field of finance, education, religion and civic power hardly come to bear on Romola. Tito's decision to sell her father's library gives an idea of the material power balance between husband and wife. All in all, Romola's educational background and her self-determination can be seen as exceptional for her time. See King, Klapitsch-Zuber and Kuehn.(△)

(8) Dorothea Barrett claims that Eliot never intended to create suitable mates for her heroines and those they find do in no way constitute an adequate complement to their potential (22).(△)

(9) Several writers have examined the influence of Comte's theories on Eliot's writing, especially *Romola*. Whereas critics such as J.B. Bullen adopt a fully Comtean reading of the novel, others have tried to either reduce it to certain aspects or to prove that Eliot tried to undermine Positivist concepts. As Barrett points out some of these readings set out from the misconception that Eliot's works passively mirror the ideologies of the men by whom she may have been influenced, i.e. Comte, Feuerbach, Spencer, Mill or Lewes. Barrett adopts the viewpoint that Eliot "found Comte's tripartite vision appealing as a firm structure in which to ground her own very different speculations as to human possibility" (75-98: 77). For discussions of the impact of Positivism on the novel see also Knoepfelmacher; Myers; Vogeler; Wright, "George Eliot and Positivism" and *Religion of Humanity*.(△)

(10) For a discussion of the Bacchus and Ariadne imagery in *Romola* see Gilbert/Gubar 526-28 and Bonaparte 86-109.(△)

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