

Rethinking Gender Construction in Victorian England in George Eliot's *Romola* and Lord Leighton's Illustrations

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Introduction

Romola is the only historical novel Eliot wrote and the work that marked her shift from the usual English rural setting to Renaissance Florence. The vicious struggle for power between political parties and their male leaders is the backdrop against which the agency of gender emerges in the form of a female protagonist, whose redeeming stature exposes power as a masculine preserve of dominion and vice materialized through war and political intrigues. Women's power is, in contrast, an empowering process of self-renunciation that dislodges male ideals of egotism in both the private and the public sphere.

Romola marked a turning point in Eliot's writing career and proved to be defining and transformative. Written with "the best of her blood" and seen as the capstone of her canon (*Letters* vi. 336), the novel opens with Lorenzo the Magnificent's death on 9 April 1492 and ends with Savonarola's execution in 1498. Fredric Leighton (1830-1896) was commissioned by the publisher George Smith to illustrate *Romola* for the *Cornhill Magazine* from July 1862 to August 1863, and in vogue with Victorian interest in visual representations, Smith wanted the author of the best seller *Adam Bede* (1859) to receive the same honors as her male counterparts, Dickens and Thackeray.¹ He signed her for the unprecedented sum of £2000 per installment and signed Leighton for an overall sum of £480 for the whole work. Illustrations were at that time commissioned by

publishers or authors and it was the responsibility of the authors to provide directions to the draughtsman. Leighton's drawings were in black and white chalk on grey paper, and then redrawn in pen and ink on woodblocks. In his correspondence with his father, Leighton is honored and elated at the opportunity of collaborating with a famous author:

you will be glad to hear of a commission just given to me by G. Smith of the Cornhill which is very acceptable to me. I am to illustrate (by-the-bye this is "strictly confidential") a novel about to appear in the Cornhill from the hand of Adam Bede (Barrington ii. 95).

Leighton's pictorial illustrations at the beginning of each installment are historical in nature and testify to his knowledge of the Quattrocento history of Florentine art and society. They are executed with precision and mirror the mood of the century and the famous architectural edifices and landmarks. Victorian epoch coincided with a revival in historical writing and painting about the Renaissance, which appealed to artists and painters (Strong 35-6). Leighton was commissioned because of his training as an academician in Renaissance Florence and its art to illustrate Eliot's historical novel about the four year reign of the Frati Minori in Florence. His masterpiece, *Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna is Carried in Procession through the Streets of Florence* (1853-55), blends the academic and the Pre-Raphaelite and in so doing, he foregrounds the specificities of his style in the same way as Eliot blends her narrative in *Romola* with a contemporary touch despite its historicity. In this respect, selecting Leighton for the illustration of Eliot's only historical novel was an obvious choice. This essay explores George Eliot's realism in the first part, sheds light on Lord Leighton's art in the following part, and argues that the collaboration between Eliot and Leighton is a negotiating process towards a radical gender construction in the final part.

Eliot's Realism, Dutch Painting, and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

Eliot's artistic mode foregrounds the importance of the visual and pictorial. Her realist creed is articulated in her famous essay, "The Natural History of German Life" (1856), but nowhere is her theory of art more clearly pronounced than in the famous disquisition on realism in chapter 17 of her first novel, *Adam Bede* (1859), wherein the narrator goes to great lengths

to expound realism in art with its aesthetic and moral dimensions. In anchoring her writing mode in Dutch painting, Eliot is intent on embracing its veracity, truthfulness, and faithfulness as a source of aspiration and a challenging achievement she should strive to emulate. She found the democratic vein with which Dutch painters and the Brotherhood² in Britain applied in drawing the lives of humble subjects profoundly valid to her compositions. The inclusiveness of the Dutch painters' art project, "which lofty-minded people despise" (*Adam Bede* 161), is presented in the chapter as a daunting task for both the writer and the reader insofar as it raises in them feelings of identification with the pain of the poor and the needy, despite their own class positioning.

A work of art, for Eliot, should invoke emotive affinities by assiduously constructing the minutiae of the characters' lives in their social environments. The artist's primary task is to "creep servilely after nature and fact" (*Adam Bede* 175) in order to meet the basic requirement of realism: that is, truthfulness and faithfulness. Humble subjects have to be portrayed in their poverty and squalor and all details about their life have to be meticulously incorporated in order to lend gravitas to the construction of the real, the backbone of Eliot's art. According to the narrator of *Adam Bede*, art should not:

impose on us any aesthetic rules which shall banish from the region of Art those old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands, those heavy clowns taking holiday in a dingy pot-house, those rounded backs and stupid weather-beaten faces that have bent over the spade and done the rough work of the world (*Adam Bede* 162).

Accuracy to nature and truthfulness to life, which fascinated Eliot, are shared by Dutch painting and the Brotherhood. The words Eliot selects in her compositions are vested with pictorialized authority in order to evoke images and pictures and this is made possible by relying on the power of the detailed description, which enables the reader to visualize the world and relate to it. Her careful study of the subject matter of her art reflects through the integration of images, such as "old women scarping carrots" and the "weather-beaten faces" (161), her interest in peasants and working class people who inhabit her works and that of Dutch painters and the Brotherhood. By adhering to a faithful portrayal of characters in their surroundings without embellishment and ornamentation, emotional affinities and identification with the poor are stirred, according to Eliot. It is only when social and physical details are depicted truthfully that the image

of a poor woman or the depiction of a man standing at the threshold of a dingy hut become ideals invoking poverty, struggle, and survival.

Despite the novelty of its setting and the remoteness of its narrative orbit from the usual English countryside scenes, *Romola* stands as an exemplar of Eliot's realism. The author's encyclopedic knowledge about Renaissance Florence and her prodigious search into Florentine art are encrypted into the tapestry of the novel. Her meticulous construction of the social, political, and artistic background of her characters and her punctilious gathering of minute details convey as closely as possible life in Florence at the end of the fifteenth century. The indispensability of the detail – a foundational trait in her realist mode – is used in order to reify through the pictorial associations of words the connectedness between the visual and the written text. In *Reading in Detail* (2007), Naomi Schor argues that realism gave the detail prominence during the Victorian era and “material contingency details” (8) have become an integral part of many works of art. By gendering the detail and aligning it to femaleness and nature and pairing maleness to art and culture, art historians and philosophers in the West wrongly associated the genius of creation with masculinity by assuming that only male artists can go beyond the detail and render the ideal and sublime. On the other hand, women excel more in writing fiction, focusing on the mimetic aspects of art, are absent as creators of conceptual art (10). Dutch painting was seen as feminine since it relies heavily on the detail while classicism was perceived as virile since it draws on the ideal (14). Eliot's fascination with Dutch painting's “*detaillism*”³ and Leighton's training as academician coalesce the real and the ideal, the two components of the narrative fabric in the depiction of the protagonist. *Romola* can be read as an instance of such an amalgam between two interlocked levels of depictions whereby the real and the ideal merge as one.

In his book *Adam Bede and Middlemarch Revisited* (2012) Joseph Hillis Miller examines realism in George Eliot's fiction as outlined in chapter 17 of *Adam Bede* and argues that her adherence to the real of Dutch painting is made possible through her use of language. “A language that can perform into existence feeling” (80) in a similar way a Dutch painting can solidify the human portrait through the use of shades and nuances. In other words, language-power stems not from its “referentiality” to the outside world, but from its “performativity” as an emotive tool (80). In this fashion, Eliot's attempts to discriminate between idealism and realism in the chapter reveal more the similarities that both concepts share and “the

impossibility of deciding what difference exists” (81). This essay will show that in the depiction of Romola, both in the written text and the illustrations, the ideal and the particular, the mundane and the sublime, are interwoven insofar as Romola and many of the novel’s characters such as Tito, her husband or Savonarola, the religious leader, incarnate ideals and stand as representatives of human struggles.

The pain of loss, the bitterness of betrayal, and the overwhelming urge of vengeance are played out in the characters as they endure, surrender, or lose. Feelings of identification are made possible through stirring the fiber of sympathy towards erring characters who are entangled in each other’s lives. The protagonist is the only character that succeeded in putting her lofty and noble aspiration into practice by administering the sick on the streets of Florence or nursing the orphan Jewish baby in the contaminated village during her stay there. In *Adam Bede and Middlemarch Visited*, Miller expresses a valuable caveat with regard to Eliot’s realism and the incisive use of the concept of sympathy in the depiction and development of characters. The language of narration – a language of feeling that moves the fiber of sympathy – is figurative in nature and relies on “catachsis” (80), meaning that “the use of terms borrowed from a visible, namable realm... has no literal language of its own” (80). Eliot’s realism, which incorporates Dutch painting’s style and the Brotherhood’s innovative contribution to Victorian art, is grounded in the emotive as rooted in the suffering of people.

Lord Leighton’s Art and Gender Ambivalence

Lord Leighton’s illustrations in *Romola* meet and intersect with Eliot’s rendering of the moral and humane ideals that underpin the novel’s aspirations as embodied by the protagonist. The author’s *tableau vivant* depictions capture the spirit of the novel and bear witness to Eliot’s realist mode in fiction. She wanted Leighton’s illustrations to convey “the listening look” (*Romola* 243), to crystalize the tragic dimension of her art with a dramatic vision. In this respect, her dramatic endeavor mirrors the Pre-Raphaelite precepts as articulated in the *Germ*, a journal that served to promote the Brotherhood’s aesthetics. In *Eliot and the Visual Arts* (1979), Hugh Witemeyer states that Leighton’s black and white work belongs to the 1860s school that rose during the second half of the nineteenth century and

was an extension of Pre-Raphaelite art and its proliferation in the Victorian novel (159). The Pre-Raphaelite concepts of simplicity, truthfulness, and beauty come close to Eliot's art.

Despite his being influenced by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Leighton's conception of the female body was, for the most part, orthodox and in line with Victorian ideologies. Joseph Kestner argues that "The history of classical-subject painting as it relates to women" intersected "with the history of women's political development in the nineteenth century" and Leighton's high-profile status and the popularity of his paintings negatively impacted the women's movement (32). He put himself at the forefront of the antisuffragist movement and wrote a letter to the second wife of G. F. Watts to sign her name on a petition titled "Appeal against Female Suffrage", which was to be published in the June 1889 edition of *The Nineteenth Century (Language of the Eyes 151-56)*. Not surprisingly, many of his paintings were targeted during the height of the suffragist movement in many towns, such as London, Hull, and Manchester. Feminists saw in his work the epitome of male misogyny in its glorification of passive and receptive female beauty. Leighton's insistence on the continuous "relevance of myth" and the celebration of "mythic eternity was a basis for resisting the progress of women" (*Mythology and Misogyny 32*).⁴ Positive reviewers during his time tried to defend his work on formal basis by focusing on the technicalities of his craftsmanship. Others, who were less favorable, pinpointed the "meretricious", the homoerotic, and the effeminate nature of his male subjects (Prettejohn 79-86).⁵

Leighton's paintings are studied and explored by many critics in light of his sexual ambivalence. His paintings of female bodies and sleeping women, clad in bright colored muslin-like negligees are entrenched in Victorian society's power dynamics of gender relations. Leighton, "whose sexuality exceeded socially sanctioned parameters," shared "the stigmatized position of women" (*The Sight of Sound 219*) and thus his liminal positioning informed his paintings of male and female subjects. In the *Victorian Nude* (1996), Alison Smith argues that the representation of submissive and passive women "could be interpreted as a rearguard gesture" against the ongoing gender debate and a push-and-pull narrative of feminist resistance and conservative counter resistance. Leighton, in this respect, presents an acutely interesting case. His various representations of male and female bodies were met with both resistance and critical appraisal because he challenged Victorian conservative taste. His depiction

of male nude figures proved to be unpopular with the viewers, with the exception of his sculpture *The Athlete Wrestling Python*, exhibited by the Royal Academy in 1877 (177). The nude male body, contrary to the representation of female nudity, was attacked as “a symptom of national degeneracy” (158). Ideas of masculinity owed much to the classical past and the glorification of athleticism and physical perfection. The musculature of a male figure in action, with his anatomic perfection, stood in stark contrast with the “effeminate” male, which was defined as a representation of a male subject “whose body was not anatomically “correct”” (173). Leighton inscribed his gender ambivalence in his male subjects and challenged gender representations of the male as the incarnation of physical prowess. Arguably, the passive and the aestheticized female body in many of his works was on par with his “effeminate” depiction of the male body in indolent postures evoking sensuality⁶.

Whereas Leighton was daring in his representations of the male body, his focus on the classical past and his choice of idealized settings attenuated the role of his female subjects and accentuated female passivity. Joseph Kestner goes as far as to argue that Pre-Raphaelite paintings, including Leighton’s works, played a pivotal role in challenging the Woman Question (*Mythology and Misogyny* 75). The proliferation of submissive female figures in Leighton’s paintings during the second half of the nineteenth century and his anti-suffragist stance were detrimental to women’s calls for progress and independence. Leighton’s antifeminism is conspicuous in “his canvases of sleeping and declining women” (*The Language of the Eyes* 156). His closed-eye women show his own resistance to women’s social and cultural agency, which were challenging male hegemony. If read against the backdrop of the Woman Question and the Suffragist movement, his paintings narrate his own anxiety and ambivalence *vis-à-vis* women as subjects. His creative power as a male was threatened by women’s presence as competitors in all cultural domains, namely painting and art. In his 1860 letter to his father, cited in the introduction, his discussion of Eliot’s facial features provides a case to the point of his stereotypical views on women. Ironically, his reference to Eliot’s “short-sighted[ness]”, with its ambiguous implications, bears further elucidation to his myopic perspective on intellectual and intelligent women. His slanted register in his letter impinges on his aesthetic interpretations of female beauty as loci erotica. His views as articulated in the letter dramatize his own anxiety towards active women. His dilemma in addressing George Eliot as “Mrs

Lewes,” “Miss Evans,” or the author of “Adam Bede,” underscores his own discomfort towards a woman who, in spite of flagrantly flouting Victorian moral norms, earned unprecedented fame and respect which exceeded his during the time of *Romola*’s composition:

Her face is large, her eyes deep set, her nose aquiline, her mouth large, the under jaw projecting, rather like Charles Quint; her voice and manner are grave, simple, and gentle. There is a curious mixture in her look; she either is or seems short-sighted. (Barrington ii, 95).

In his mind’s eye, Eliot is reminiscent of Charles Quint, a king infamous for his physical deformity. His description of Eliot foregrounds her monstrosity in his eyes and verges on the grotesque. This testifies to his blindness to women’s intellectual beauty. He viewed Eliot in light of his phallogocentric anxieties and sexual insecurities, perhaps because the position that Eliot enjoyed during her time was a direct challenge to the Victorian-long held belief that women were not capable of intellectual achievements. The last part of the essay explores the illustrations as framed within the narrative discourse of the written text.

The Illustrations, the Written Text, and the Construction of Gender in Romola

Eliot was critical of both the depiction of Romola and her father’s posture (see text below)

It is worth noting that Eliot’s correspondence with Leighton, in explicating her intentions regarding *Romola*, constitutes the backdrop against which the illustrations can be interpreted. In her letters, she prefigures the constant state of transaction and negotiation between the novelist and the painter. Though he was renowned as a painter of subjects from medieval Florence, Eliot was quite critical of some of Leighton’s illustrations and she even made him make some changes. She saw her work as superior to his illustrations, or rather his sketches as secondary to her word:

I am convinced that illustrations can only form a sort of overture to the text. The artist who uses the pencil must otherwise be tormented to misery by the deficiency or requirement of the one who uses the pen, and the writer, on the other hand must die of impossible expectations (*Letters* iv. 55).



Figure 1
Frederic Leighton.
“*The Blind Scholar
and his Daughter*”.
The Cornhill, July 1862.

This oft-quoted statement reveals Eliot’s expectations as well as disappointment with regard to the illustrations in *Romola*. The above quote shows Eliot’s awareness of the supremacy of the text over the image, her belief that her work is primary, and her conviction that the artist should execute her vision and meet her plan. In her 1860 letter to Leighton, she acknowledges the challenges that both of them faced: “I feel for you as well as for myself in this inevitable difficulty-nay impossibility of producing perfect correspondence between my intention and the illustrations” (*Letters*, iv, 40).

The correspondence between Eliot and Leighton significantly points to how Leighton’s contribution to the novel was forged by the written text, which serves as a frame of reference and a delineating setting. In “Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature” (1988), Griselda Pollock examines power relation in art between the authority of the written text and the power of the painted image insofar as male-female relations are negotiated and produced. She argues that a woman’s position as a muse, object, and an

artistic product is opposed to masculinity, creativity, and production. In her archive-based study of Elizabeth Siddall, a model and a muse who posed for many Pre-Raphaelite painters, and was herself an artist, Pollock shows the contradictions this woman-image and written reproduction came to epitomize due to her unsettling positioning as both an object and subject of knowledge (*Vision and Difference* 140-42). According to Pollock, negotiations between a text and a drawing results in intertextual consistency and inconsistency that destabilizes attempts to secure an identity between drawings and a person, however, the written text functions “in a frame, positioning the drawings within an authoritative reading of their meanings” (159). Her insights into the way Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s, the famous Pre-Raphaelite painter and Siddall’s husband, drawings function within the textual context, consisting of the body of his own texts and the biographical works of his brother, can be extended, with a slight shift, to Leighton’s illustrations in *Romola*, where the written text, *Romola*, invests the male authored drawings with “authoritative reading” by conveying the changing image of the protagonist and the anxiety of the male artist with regard to woman’s progress from passivity and assiduity to activity and agency.

A careful study of Eliot’s correspondence with Leighton and her critique of his illustrations in *Romola* bear witness to her own position on the Woman Question and her belief in true representations of life. In one of her earliest letters to Leighton, she draws his attention to major defects in the depiction of Romola and her father in the illustration titled *The Blind Scholar and his Daughter*. She writes: “I think your sketch is charming, considered in itself”, and sees his engravings as an extension of her narrative: “I would have wished Bardo’s head to be raised with the chin thrust forward a little – the visual attitude of the blind head, I think – and turned a little towards Romola”, “As if he [Romola’s father] were looking at her [Romola]” (*Letters* iv. 40). Perhaps Eliot’s insistence on the blind scholar looking directly at his daughter has to do with his incapacity to see her ability to inherit his legacy, pursue his research, and fulfil his will, that of immortalizing his name by donating his books and precious art collections to found a public library in Florence. Eliot sought to add another layer to the picture in delineating the character of Bardo⁷ by highlighting his blindness as synonymous with the futility of his scholarly endeavor, and her criticism of Leighton’s blind Bardo echoes the “short-sightedness” of the illustrator’s first impression of the author’s remarkable intellect. Bardo’s lack of vision is not rooted in his physical blindness but

in his fanaticism and misogyny. In surrounding him by Greek and Roman statues that he cannot see, both the author and the illustrator capture the futility of Bardo's interest and antiquarian search into paganism. He is not able to see his daughter's intellectual potential because she is a woman, and, ironically, gives her away in a marriage deal to the man he mistakenly thinks will found a library that carries his name after his death. Little does Bardo know that Romola's deeds will immortalize his name. Leighton's illustration does not fully encapsulate the symbolic dimensions of blindness as a moral failing rather than a mere physical handicap. Whilst the light in the narrative radiates from Romola, the light in the illustration comes from the outside, conveying the wrong impression with regard to Romola's spiritual rebirth, suggestive of the ethical metamorphosis of the protagonist and her progress towards sublimity:

The only spot of bright colour in the room was made by the hair of a tall maiden of seventeen or eighteen, who was standing before a carved leggio ... the hair was of a reddish gold colour, enriched by an unbroken small ripple such as may be seen in the sunset clouds on grandest autumnal evenings ... The blind father sat with head uplifted and turned a little aside towards his daughter, as if he were looking at her (*Romola* 46).

The drawing of Romola (Figure 1) is another shortcoming on the part of Leighton that Eliot pinpoints tactfully in the same letter: "Her face and hair, though deliciously beautiful, are not just the thing – how could they be?" (*Letters* iv. 40). Eliot wanted her hair to fall around her neck and her dress to be plain "without ornament" (*Letters* iv. 40). In Leighton's illustration, the light, coming from the window behind the protagonist's back, engulfs the scene in a lighter atmosphere which opposes the morbid and more morose setting that *The Blind Scholar and his Daughter* are shrouded in within the narrative. The light in Eliot's composition comes from Romola's hair and reflects brightness on her complexion, radiates from her physical being, and foreshadows her intellectual and spiritual elevation.

Eliot's dramatization of the life of Savonarola can further elucidate the nature of Leighton's illustrations and Eliot's delineation of Romola. Fra Girolamo Savonarola (1452-98) is a major character in the novel and serves as the protagonist's mentor and worshiped counsellor (see figure 2). Leighton's drawing was inspired by Raphael's *Cartoon for St. Paul Preaching in Athens* (1513-14), but the positioning of the hands



Figure 2
Frederic Leighton.
“Father, I will be guided”.
The Cornhill, February 1863

is different. While St. Paul’s hands are held aloft towards the skies, Savonarola’s are lowered towards the ground, warranting Romola’s submission. This conjures up the ongoing subordination of Romola. Savonarola’s depiction in the illustrations is not fully formed and remains inchoate; Leighton refrained from sketching a clear facial delineation of the influential Dominican preacher⁸ who defied Pope Alexander VI, was excommunicated, and later burned at the stake. This task is undertaken by Eliot with astonishing success, her written word, operating as a drawing pen, sketches him in all shades and painstakingly dramatizes his fall from glory to disgrace. Whereas in the illustrations he appears in watershed moments in the life of the protagonist as a ghost or an apparition, in the narrative he is a great orator and religious leader with a noble vision, larger than life and too ideal to be implemented.

Both Eliot’s aesthetics and Leighton’s art dovetail in many instances to articulate the inner pulse of the protagonist’s rebellion and accentuate her agony. The illustrations of Tito, alongside those of Bardo and Savonarola, can shed extra light on the text’s representations of gender and contextualize



Figure 3
Frederic Leighton.
“Suppose you let me look
at myself”.
The Cornhill, July 1862

Romola’s quest. The depiction of Tito (see Figure 3), as he watches himself in the mirror typifies what critics call the effeminate male figure in Leighton’s canon (Smith 173, Ormond 22, Ogden 156). It is a harbinger that predates his affirmative and explicit homoeroticism in the depiction of his male subjects in such a work as *Jonathan’s Token to David* (1868). Tito in his second plate, *Suppose you Let me Look at Myself*, is strikingly feminine in his facial beauty, high cheekbones, and sleek body. The well-defined and supple lower-body is barely covered and shows off to advantage his ballet dancer posture. His leg, perching on what appears to be a wooden block, exudes erotic sensuality in the loving eyes of Nello, the barber, holding the razor, a phallic symbol, and closely standing behind him. Tito appears to be conscious of the male gaze which he has internalized. This illustration could be read in the context of Leighton’s rumored homosexuality or rather attraction to “the young and very young of both sexes”, in whom “he found a fulfilment as much emotional as purely sexual,” as mentioned in *Lord Leighton* (Ormond 22). His 1868 oil canvas incorporates the same elements the plate depicts, namely the embedded sexual attraction between

a young and an old man (*Masculinity in Victorian Painting* 253). In “The “Romola” Code: Men of Appetites in George Eliot’s Historical Novel” (2011), Nancy Henry contends that Eliot’s literary and historical allusions in *Romola* serve as a sub-text wherein homosexuality is encoded and typified in the characters of Tito and Nello, the barber. *The Barber’s Shop* is one of the many all-exclusive male locales in Florence where men meet, entertain, and socialize. Nello, for example, calls Tito his “Orpheus” and plays with his curls (*Romola* 32). Eliot, who read the life of Savonarola and that of many Florentine poets and painters, was aware of unconventional Florentine sexual leanings and homosexuality, especially amongst artists.⁹ The presence of the *Piagnoni* (the popular name of Savonarola’s followers) who patrolled the streets of Florence and waged a war on sodomy as well as gender ambiguity (Rocke 210) in the novel can be understood as an embedded reference to homosexuality (Henry 328-30). Leighton’s success in illustrating Nello and Tito is echoed in Eliot’s “Unmitigated delight! Nello is better than mine. I see the love and care with which the drawings are done” (*Letters* iv. 41). Leighton seems to have decoded the hidden message of male homosexuality and understood the embedded layers of the text. Leonee and Richard Ormond admit that Leighton “fulfilled part of himself in the company of young men” (48) while Smith maintains that he “was subject to charges of effeminacy” (182) and this can explain, to a degree, the success of the illustration and the happiness of Eliot.

Albeit ideologically incongruous with regard to gender, Leighton’s and Eliot’s collaboration successfully dramatized the development of the protagonist and her moral elevation. While Eliot demonstrates the importance of cultural forces in shaping and changing gender constructs, Leighton’s drawing on the history of classical subject painting and the mythological figure of the Madonna echoes the history of women’s political development in nineteenth-century England. The moral progress of *Romola* questions the separate sphere ideology by eliding the lines that differentiate and define women’s roles and confinement to the domestic ambit. In *Romola*, an empowering narrative that “propels the underprivileged and unauthorized to acquire and yield power” (Andres 103), there is a sense of urgency to transport female ideals of charity, sympathy, and renunciation to the hostility and cruelty of the public sphere. The embodiment of the Madonna by *Romola*, who forsakes her husband, is subversive and a steady attempt by Leighton, under the guidance of Eliot, to apotheosize the stigmatized and the ostracized.



Figure 4
Frederic Leighton.
“Coming home”.
The Cornhill, December 1862

As opposed to the character of Romola, the depiction of male characters in both the novel and the illustrations is a dramatic process of belittling and dwarfing before their annihilation. Tito is interestingly different from both Bardo and Savonarola because he is physically attractive and sensual in both verbal and visual representations. In *Coming Home* (Figure 4), Leighton succeeds in limning his moral failure by first effeminating him and second by belittling him in a strikingly outstanding posture as he crawls the stairs while Romola is standing above in full grace and grandeur overlooking his caricatured presence. “*Coming home*” reveals the burden of his vice as it is symbolically carried by the heavy body armor he just bought from Niccolo, the blacksmith.

Leighton’s “*Drifting Away*” (Figure 5) shows Romola looking distraught while sitting in the boat that will take her from Florence to the Mediterranean shores. “*At the Well*” (Figure 6) is the last plate that depicts



Figure 5. Frederic Leighton. "Drifting away". *The Cornhill*, June 1863

her arrival at the plagued village. When set against Eliot's narrative, Leighton's illustration does not render the essence of the symbolic journey of the self in seeking rebirth and salvation of the protagonist. Arguably, the word remains much more powerful than Leighton's illustrations in limning emotions or feelings because Eliot's art draws substantially on the word's emotive power and the pictorial. The reification of the abstract in literature through metaphors and images is more accessible than it is in visual art, especially in *Romola* where imagery is constructed around the nuances of light and dark, water and land. The scene of Romola's waking in her boat connotes the moment of crisis that precedes resolution by depicting the dissipation of darkness into daylight. Her body and soul respond gradually to the breaking daylight in the same way that the darkness of the night gives way to the brightness of the morning. This dramatic use of scenery, according to Barbara Hardy, is a method of presenting characters and developing actions, and, in the case of *Romola*, it is through the symbolic use of scenes from nature, such as the sea, water, morning lights, darkness, and flames, that the protagonist achieves her rebirth and discovers a larger meaning to life (183). Her drifting away from Florence and journeying on the sea helps her to stop and meditate on her previous life; she transcends

the fanatic preaching of the Frati as she witnesses the unfolding of the tragic experience of the Jews' expulsion and killing.

The scene of water and daylight is important to the novel in two ways. First, it contributes to the structural development of the plot towards its dénouement and expands the visual dimension that the illustration cannot comprehensively render. Second, it constructs the thematic development of the narrative through the use of symbols of awakening and rebirth before the final return of the protagonist to Florence with a new humanist awareness and widening of her vision to human plight beyond the limitations of her previous Florentine life. Hardy describes the use of scene as image in *Romola* as intentional and crucial in the development of the plot due to its symbolical dimensions. It is essential in giving illusions of "the actions as rooted in normal space and time" (183). This quotation from *Romola's* "Waking" relies on the use of shade and light to present a cut-out photographed scene and typifies Eliot realist mode, which aims at helping the reader to visualize the scenes and relate emotionally to the pain of others.

Romola in her boat passed from dreaming into long deep sleep, and then again from deep sleep into busy dreaming, till at least she felt herself stretching out her arms in the court of the Bargello, where the flickering flames of the tapers seemed to get stronger and stronger till the dark scene was blotted out with light. Her eyes opened, and she saw it was lying still in a little creek; on her right hand speckless sapphire-blue of the Mediterranean; on her left one of those scenes which were and still are repeated again and again, like a sweet rhythm, on the shore of that loveliest sea (640).

This passage gives evidence of *Romola's* ability to enact what it describes. In this respect, Eliot's text incorporates pictorial elements, thereby putting the actual illustration by Leighton at a disadvantage. Eliot self-consciously points to the visual potential of her text with the repeated use of the word "scene". The repetition is so consistent that the verbal is transformed into a visual vehicle enabling the reader to "pass" from "one world to another". For Eliot, the grasping of a depiction goes from the eye to the mind and words visualize the image in a camera-like movement. Eliot is intensifying the transcendent nature of the text, symbolically and visually by merging realism and idealism, the authority of the historical detail and the universality of the human nature. Sally Shuttleworth argues that George Eliot's canon is marked by her gradual "movement away from

realism to idealism” (201), from conventional depiction of characters to profound construction of the human psyche (201). Romola, in my view, is a dividing line where idealism and realism merge in the progress of the protagonist from a dutiful daughter to a paragon of love and compassion. She, as an embodiment of love and motherhood, brings divine ideals to earth and her association with earthly concerns makes her a channel of peace and a vessel of charity. The polarized construction of gender that links women to earth and men to heaven is irrevocably subverted in *Romola*. It is only on earth that humanity can create heaven.

The quoted passage is constructed on the symbols of light and water as sources of life and rebirth. The action taken by Romola is both mental and spiritual; her sea-journey is the beginning of a new life for her. The blue shining water of the sea beneath the glorious sun ushers the protagonist into her legendary effort to save the village and its people. In exemplifying Eliot’s moral vision, Romola is envisioning a release from all forms of patriarchal subordination and duties as wife and daughter in order to espouse a wider and nobler vocation, that of a savior. In constructing this scene, Eliot uses the technique of *tableau vivant* to mark the emblematic moment in Romola’s life. The depiction of the dead bodies is close to a painting in its all-encompassing photographic scenes, where Romola is portrayed with the dark-skinned baby “on her bosom” (642) while looking to the scattered dead crops at the center. McDonagh argues that

the narrative draws attention to the composition as though it were a painting, since it assumes the iconography of religious representations of the Virgin. Here Eliot presents the scene in terms of a *tableau vivant*, a technique that she adopts at many symbolic moments within her texts (46)

The whole chapter, up to the point in which Romola picks up the baby and heads for the village, can be viewed as a picture, a photograph, or more likely an oil painting that captures the Pre-Raphaelite spirit in many ways. First, the fascination with Renaissance Florence and the iconic religious figure of the Virgin feature throughout, and then, in this chapter, Romola incarnates the legendary figure of the Mother. Second, the use of brilliant colors, like blue, green, and yellow with golden shades, evoke hope and happiness. The intense bright coloring of the scene intentionally avoids brown and earthy colors up to the moment when Romola faces the dead corpses and the ugly view that interrupts her dream-like voyage. The use



Figure 6. Frederic Leighton. “At the well”. *The Cornhill*, August 1863

of color and water offers great symbolic implications as she decides to leave Florence. The water of the sea, as a purifying force, is related to the womb-phase. Her decision to take a boat and sail away from Florence may be understood as an escape from the law of the father and a return to the womb. The dominant male vision of the world, as a space of struggle for power, is challenged by Romola’s sympathy and love. The idealization of the protagonist is part of Eliot’s realism and an extension of her humane vision (Bonaparte 20, Booth 173, Shuttleworth 163).

Feminist critics have endeavored to revise female writings and in so doing they have brought new insights to their works and lives alike. George Eliot was amongst the first to be revisited as a towering figure and an undeniably pioneering novelist. The authorial violence with which she eliminates many of her male characters in *Romola* is quite unprecedented in her canon. Gillian Beer argues that Romola, after the death or executions of all the father-figures of the novel, assumes all kinds of authority, both in the plagued village and when she returns home to Florence. She states that male figures are treated with “extraordinary violence” (121). Dubbed as “the Angel of Destruction” (Gilbert and Gubar 478), Eliot consistently and unflinchingly exposed her society’s gender ideology; she succeeded in her

writing, and in her life, despite the unconventionality of her private life with Lewes, to free herself from the angel/whore paradigm. Gilbert and Gubar correctly state that the mad woman is the author's own image: "an image of her anxiety and rage" (48-9). Mary Poovey, who has followed the thread to the fullest, argues that the act of writing during the nineteenth century was "unladylike" because it was considered "self-assertive". Speaking about the female writer, she states that "the inhibitions visible in her [Eliot's] writing constitute a record of her historical oppression, so the work itself proclaims her momentary, possibly unconscious, but effective defiance" (Poovey 36-42). In *Women and the Demon*, Nina Auebach emphasizes Eliot's depiction of active female types. Eliot's awareness of her gender identity as a woman writer is translated into her awareness that "her essence is activity" (55). In line with my reading of *Romola*, the protagonist in the text and in the illustrations is in motion and in continuous progress. Her self-effacing qualities remain questionable because Eliot, her creator, is a woman who "lives in verbs, according to degrees of mobility; never in the syntax is she passive, never is she object of other activity" (94).

If put into the context of the novel and the illustrations, the domestic ideals of maternal love, charity, chastity, and purity, as celebrated in Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House* (1854), are embodied and politicized by Romola in the public sphere. The binary opposition that separates men from women, the domestic from the public, and the sacred from the profane is a contested domain where Romola operates. Eliot's idealization of her protagonist subverts Victorians ideals of femininity by offering a new life to Romola's desperate escape by boat to the unknown, which comes quite close to an act of suicide. Despite being evocative of the tragic end of many fallen women in Victorian England,¹⁰ who in moments of desperation drown themselves, Eliot's uses the voluntarily voyage by water of the protagonist to transform her into a legendary figure and kills by water her husband who clings to life and power by all means possible. In this regard, Eliot unsettles the polarity of virgin/whore, masculine/feminine, and earth/heaven and proposes a approach to gender away from the Victorian binary opposition.

Alison Booth ties in with the basic premise of feminist readings of the pioneering female authors, yet introduces new insights into the problematic relation of the author to her text. She highlights the autobiographical vein in *Romola* and her dramatic and protean depiction as a robust response to

women's plight. Romola, "the Eliot Heroine who most distinctly represents the political role of Victorian ladies", is Eliot's lady of the lamp. Booth establishes a comparison between Romola and Florence Nightingale but goes even further to draw a parallel between the powerful portrayal of the protagonist and Tito, her husband. Her statement, "Romola in contrast overcomes egotism and so is granted another life after death-by-water, achieving sainthood without self-annihilation because of the patriarchs die in her stead", echoes in this respect the seminal study of Beer, whom she quotes. This feminist reading of the novel is a radical departure from the charges levelled against Eliot's conventional depiction of her female characters and their disheartening fate. With reference to the denigrated epilogue, Booth reads it in a much more assertive way, seeing it as a triumphant return and "a tableau that pays decorum tribute to the patriarchs while foregrounding Romola's authority". She is treated "like the highest ranking survivor in a tragedy" and honored with delivering 'the last word' (192).

In the same vein, but with much emphasis on the ideologies of motherhood, Margaret Homans argues that Romola, like her creator, grapples with the issues related to language: "what is the relation between Romola's lot with respect to language and Eliot's own?" (216). Romola is a scholar, a translator but not a producer of knowledge. She reads for her father, she serves as her father's amanuensis, a passive internalizer of phallogentric ideologies, and transmitter of male texts. In her apotheosis as the Virgin, she incarnates the "Word" and "disconcerts the opposition and even the difference between literal and figurative" (221). The plate, illustrating Romola holding the baby in her hands against her chest, evokes the image of the Virgin and the Christ child. In a manner of speaking, Romola, as an embodiment of the Madonna, is the bearer of the Savior, i.e. the Word is inscribed within her. It can be argued that Romola's androgyny reveals Eliot's vision about women's plight in the context of humanism. Dorothea Barrett bolsters the argument by contending Eliot's heroines are constructed on metaphors of physical enormity, sovereignty, and androgyny (176). The blurring of the dividing lines between male superiority and female inferiority are contested through the use of the mythological figure of the Virgin or the Madonna to trace the progress of Romola. This is an intentional attempt from both the writer and the illustrator to undermine gender boundaries. This is a paradigmatic trait that, if considered in light of the gender debate, engulfs both works with a sense of inconclusiveness and indeterminacy.

Leighton's drawings in *Romola* unsettle the male/female division and come close to Eliot's own aesthetics. In *The Victorian Nude*, Smith argues that one consistent trait of conservative art criticism of the period was its vocabulary of masculine power and domination. The Pre-Raphaelites, however, sought to undermine preconceived ideas on the inferiority of women and the superiority of men and, as a result of that, they were berated for their flagrant reversal of gender roles and social and religious norms (82). Whether in spite of or because of being criticized on the basis of feminizing the masculine and masculinizing the feminine, Leighton's renegotiation of gender boundaries could be argued in the context of incipient feminism. His collaboration with Eliot did result in illustrations which were seminal in undermining gender stereotypes and, in so doing, he promoted a discourse which came close to that of the Woman Question advocates.

The use of myth turns subversive thanks to Eliot's accompanying and dominating narrative. Her narrative contains Leighton's conservative depictions and curbs his resistance to women's role in the public sphere. The myth of the Madonna is fully probed in *Romola* by both author and painter. The use of myth counters the oppressiveness of female idealization that *Romola* resists. She dramatizes the plight of Victorian women and the enduring struggle of its author to engage the Woman Question without being politically committed. A novel that grapples with such statements as "when the duty of obedience ends, and the duty of resistance begins" (431) lays bare the dissonance of first-wave feminist critics. Kate Millet, in condemning the novel because of "the pervasive Victorian fantasy of the good woman who goes down into Samaria and rescues the fallen men – nurse, guide, mother, adjunct the race" (139), failed to appreciate Eliot's celebration of the transgressive nature of *Romola*, a philanthropic woman who steps outside the marital and domestic domain. This is not surprising if we consider Doris Elliott's argument in *The Angel out of the House* that the charitable figure of the female protagonist was a subversive literary convention which was not well received by many critics in Victorian England.

Conclusion

The problematic issue of gender permeates my reading of *Romola* and its accompanying illustrations. My study of ineffectual male characters in the text, as well as the illustrations, deciphers and brings new insights to Eliot's

ostensibly ambivalent stand on the Woman Question as alleged by the first wave feminists. *Romola* can be read as a *tableau vivant*, a coloured painting with Romola in the foreground and the shadowy male characters in the background passively eye witnessing her odyssey. The correspondence between the former as the one spearheading the investigation of gender preconceptions in *Romola*. In countering the criticism of *Romola*'s epilogue as an unsatisfactory closure, which brought to the fore the Woman Question advocates' discontent with Eliot, she never intended to provide her protagonists with solutions, worthy male counterparts and, more than anything else, an independent and fulfilling life. She was intent on accentuating the tragic in her protagonists' lives and their plight as Victorian women. Through Romola, she contemplates her own life in the absence of her talent: "She often wonders what her life had been/Without that voice for channel to her soul./ She says, it must have leaped through all the limbs – Made her a Maenad – made her snatch a brand/ And fire some forest" ("Armagart" 189). In a passage towards the end of the narrative, Romola is looking outside and seeing the hills that obstruct her view. What lays hidden beyond the mountains is what Eliot attempted and achieved and what Romola attempted and failed to achieve. Romola dramatizes Eliot's anxiety as a female author in Victorian England and her ongoing struggle to carve a niche for her herself and fashion valid feminine tools to write with the difference of a woman.

Leighton's illustrations, contained within the confines of the text, evolved and dovetailed with Eliot's gender awareness. *Romola* contextualizes the illustrations within a narrative of gender whereby transgression is furthered through the use of the myth of the Madonna. The heated debates that predated the passing of the infamous Contagious Diseases Acts¹¹ served as a political platform for many activists and early campaigners of the women's movement to launch their attacks on the Victorian double standard of sexual morality. This debate served as the backdrop for the novel, which counters Victorian ideologies on sexuality by inviting the readers to see all ideals incarnated in Romola. It is Eliot's narrative which fleshes out Leighton's employment of archetypes and his one-dimensional mythological depiction of the Madonna. What first wave feminists perhaps failed to read in the protagonist is that she is a subject in the making and a work in progress. Romola, just like the writer, is aware of the lofty summit as well as of the obstructing hills that have to be contended with before inviting the reader to a radical ending. Realism

for Eliot had little to do with political commitment. The representation of the real is primarily aesthetic; it interrogates but never falsifies or smooths over the hostilities of the outside world. For Eliot, the ideal and the real are conflated in her representation of the protagonist. Romola encapsulates the Victorian ideals of femininity, not in a celebratory and reinforcing way, but in an elegiac mood of resignation in a society that stifles women's aspirations.



- 1 For further information on illustration and the Victorian novel, see, for example, *Victorian Literature and Victorian Visual Imagination*, eds. Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordan (1996); *The Victorian Illustrated Book* (2002), ed. Richard Maxwell, and *The Victorian Novel and the Space of the Art: Fictional Form on Display* (2014) by Den Gilmore.
- 2 The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, an art movement founded in 1848 by a group of young artists, coincided with Eliot's own writing career while Dutch painters were in vogue during the 17th century, both are avant-gardist during their times in their realistic accuracy and endeavour the represent life and nature faithfully, which appealed to George Eliot and impacted Lord Leighton. See for further information Hugh Witemeyer's *George Eliot and the Visual Arts* (1979) and Leonee and Richard Osmond's *Lord Leighton* (1975).
- 3 A word coined by G.H. Lewis, George Eliot's partner, in *The Principles of Success in Literature* (1865): "Of late years there has been a reaction against conventionalism which called itself Idealism, in favour of *detaillism* which calls itself Realism." p. 100.
- 4 Suffragists attacked paintings deemed abhorrently anti-feminist because they incarnated Victorian ideals of femininity, in particular passivity. See, for example, the *Manchester Guardian's* full report on the attack made by Annie Briggs, Evelyn Manesta, and Lillian Forrester on Manchester Art Gallery of 3 April 1913 in revenge for the sentencing of the Suffragist leader Emmeline Pankhurst. Two of Leighton's paintings were disfigured during that attack. Lord Leighton's *Farewell*, in Ferens Art Gallery in Hull, had to be removed and it was put back only on the outbreak of the First World War after a truce made with the suffragists. The curator had contemplated putting policemen on duty to protect the painting.
- 5 Lord Leighton's role as the President of the Royal Academy might have, in a way or another, tinged his art with Victorian propriety. His position as part of the status quo impinged on his work. See for example "The Leighton Exhibition", *Daily News* (2 January 1897), p. 6: "It is the fashion to speak of Leighton as an ideal President; but...one feels he would have been a greater master if the Academy had not taught him to be academic."

- 6 His visits to the Orient, namely Egypt, shaped the depiction of his male nude subjects, his sexual proclivity and his attraction to Oriental men are discussed alongside his works in Jongwood Jeremy Kim's *Painted Men in Britain* (13-56).
- 7 The blind scholar, Bardo, can be seen as a predecessor of her most self-absorbed, egocentric scholar Reverend Edward Casaubon, the protagonist's husband in *Middlemarch*, who spends his life searching for the "Key to all Mythologies" (chapter 2) in vain.
- 8 Wittemeyer states that some important characters in *Romola* such as Savonarola "never found adequate forms", *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*, p. 155.
- 9 For further information on the subject of Leighton's paintings and homosexuality see, for example, Joseph A. Kestner's *Masculinities in Victorian Painting* where he makes a strong case for homosexual relations between young and old men in Leighton's paintings: *Hit!* and his early work's *Jonathan's Token to David* (250-53).
- 10 For further information see Regina Barreca's *Sex and Death in Victorian Literature* (1990), pp. 78-79.
- 11 Parliamentary Acts, passed in 1864, amended in 1866 and 1869, and removed in 1886, allowing policemen to arrest prostitutes in ports and army towns and examine them. If tested positive to venereal diseases, they were locked in hospitals until cured. Those acts targeted as well working class and poor women.



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