


2014

Romola and Politics

Andrew Sanders

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Sanders, Andrew, "Romola and Politics" (2014). *The George Eliot Review*. 645.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/645>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

ROMOLA AND POLITICS

By Andrew Sanders

It could properly be argued that *Romola* is George Eliot's most overtly *political* novel. Unlike *Felix Holt* or *Middlemarch* it doesn't directly refer to near contemporary political events, or to those of George Eliot's childhood and youth. Unlike *Adam Bede* it does not deal with the ramifications of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars which cast their long shadow over the Victorian years. Nevertheless, *Romola* demands that readers respond to a whole range of complex political issues: historical, sexual, feminist, religious and, of course, to a whole range of historical concerns which can be seen as fore-shadowings of the vital events of the modern Italian *Risorgimento*.

Romola is of course primarily an *historical* novel set in the closing years of the fifteenth century. The opening paragraphs remind us that it opens 'more than three centuries and half ago, in the mid spring time of 1492'¹ and that Columbus is negotiating his way to setting off on his great voyage towards what were to Europeans the still unknown Americas. *Romola* opens as dawn breaks over the European continent and we are bidden to see this dawn as akin to the opening of a new historical age which will prove to have an immediate, if indirect and still ill-defined, impact on the world of 1863. The Florentine world, at least, is on a cusp of uncertain developments:

For the Unseen Powers were mighty. Who knew – who was sure – that there was *any* name given to them behind which there was no angry force to be appeased, no intercessory pity to be won? (Proem, 7)

It is also a world of architectural and ritual continuities with our world, but one which is aware that momentous changes are at hand:

Only look at the sunlight and shadows on the grand walls that were built solidly, and have endured in their grandeur; look at the faces of the little children, making another sunlight amid the shadows of age; look, if you will into the churches, and hear the same chants, see the same images as of old – the images of willing anguish for a great end, of beneficent love and ascending glory; see upturned living faces, and lips moving to the old prayers for help. These things have not changed. The sunlight and the shadows bring their old beauty and waken the old heart-strains at morning, noon and eventide; the little children are still the symbol of the eternal marriage between love and duty; and men still yearn for the reign of peace and righteousness – still own *that* life to be the highest which is a conscious voluntary sacrifice. For the Pope Angelico is not come yet. (Proem, 9)

At the end of the Proem to *Romola* we are therefore presented with a broad outline which suggests significant motifs all of which will be explored as the novel develops. We are bidden to observe continuities between then and now but the basic premise is that of anamnesis – a purposeful recalling of things past, a recall which is ramified in the now. The political implications are as much religious as they are secular. Eliot's references to children and to churches are not idle for both are taken to suggest dominant elements in what she calls the 'eternal marriage between love and duty.' Florentine churches, seen and heard in the 1860s echo with ancient chanting and with traditional Christian imagery of both 'anguish' and 'glory'. Eliot's readers, both in 1863 and now, would be fully aware of the emphasis she

consistently puts on the concepts of 'love' and 'duty' both in a religious and a secular context. But it is the mention of the Florentine children that seems to open up an exclusively secular vision of continuity and change. Above all the Proem sets out the notion of an unfulfilled anticipation in the references to the long wait for the advent of the Angelic Pope who will bring in 'a new order of things'. If it suggests parallels elsewhere in Eliot's work, this Proem looks forward to the unfulfilled yearning with which *Daniel Deronda* ends. Nevertheless, as I hope to explore later in this paper, love, duty, religion and a woman and a child have a particular potency in *Romola*.

In the essay 'Looking Backward' in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* Eliot offers a further reflection on anamnesis. Here she is anxious to remind readers that not all acts of memory are constructive, creative or progressive. Once tainted by nostalgia, by a hankering after a lost Golden Age rather than by an anticipatory yearning, memory has its drawbacks:

I have often had the fool's hectic of wishing about the unalterable, but with me that useless exercise has turned chiefly on the conception of a different self, and not as it usually does in literature, on the advantage of having been born in a different age, and more especially in one where one's life is imagined to have been altogether majestic and graceful. With my present abilities, external proportions, and generally small provision for ecstatic enjoyment, where is the ground for confidence that I should have had a preferable career in such an epoch of society? An age in which every department has its awkward-squad seems in my mind's eye to suit me better.²

As Theophrastus Such goes on to explain, an espousal of lost golden ages implies an 'irrational' scorn not only for present usages but also for present generations. He concludes that 'reflections of this sort have gradually determined me not to grumble at the age in which I happen to have been born.' The agreeably sympathetic 'awkward squads', by which Theophrastus seems to imply those political dissenters who challenge the *status quo*, are perhaps what we might now call 'pressure groups' who work within and beyond given parliamentary and party political boundaries. They are the kind of people who had pressed for Constitutional reform in the 1820s and 30s and those singularly determined men and women who in the opening decades of the nineteenth century had brought about the abolition of the slave trade and then forcefully questioned the legality of slavery itself within the British empire. 'Awkward squads' might also be made up of those people, 'like you and me,' who contribute to the 'growing good of the world'.

Romola, as opposed to novels with roughly contemporary settings such as *Felix Holt*, or *Middlemarch* or *Daniel Deronda*, shows us plainly that the past is decidedly another country and not one populated by 'awkward squads'. But Savonarola's Florence is not so much another country where they do things differently as a parallel space where historical difference allows a writer to explore potential. As with Shakespeare in the Roman plays, the representation of an alternative political system opens up a discussion of a dynamic which is quite unlike that explored in dramas with near contemporary settings. For Shakespeare the Roman Republic was constitutionally unlike a mediaeval or renaissance kingdom just as George Eliot's picture of Medicean Florence is vitally distinct from early Victorian England. A fictional analysis of Florence in its fifteenth-century ferment does not have direct reference either to the Italy of the Risorgimento or to the wider politics of nineteenth-century Europe, but it does help to give readers a *context* in which to think about modern parallels. What went wrong in Florence in the

1490s – the French invasion, the exile and return of the Medici, and the rise and fall of the radically ethical regime of Savonarola – all have relevance in the world of 1863 and well beyond it. So too, in terms of a radical feminist agenda, Romola's story – the history of an educated woman who moves painfully beyond marriage to a kind of independence within what one can best see as a nuclear commune rather than a conventional family – seems to be realizable in the past if never in Eliot's novels with a modern setting. Eliot, like Theophrastus Such, knows that there are no lost Golden Ages to be nostalgic about, and, as we are shown it the Florence of 1492 is far from golden. Moreover, Eliot knows that history cannot be changed. What a novelist like Eliot *can* do, however, is to suggest that history is monitory. She can represent human potential in another context and that, drawing from this world of *difference*, she is at liberty to suggest how things might be in a developing present and in the opening future. Pope Angelico may never come, but the growing good of the world depends not only on benign action but also on what history can both suggest to and teach the present.

In historical fiction the rules of the political and social game are to some degree changed, though their flexibility is strictly limited both by the need to follow records and to obey the received 'facts'. We are not speaking of games of chance, but of manoeuvres within an ordained framework. Florence's turbulent history in the 1490s cannot be undone, let alone re-written, but it can open windows into modern potential. There are few feasible 'might-have-beens' offered to us, but, alternatively, there are many still realizable possibilities for human endeavour. Political and ethical change ('the growing good of the world') is the dynamic of the future, not the past.

For George Eliot in *Romola* change is exclusively rooted in the secular realm. Much of the reference to the divine in Savonarola's prophecies, sermons and *obiter dicta* is subdued, even suppressed. He is represented as a man of his time, passionate about his faith and the import of his prophecies, but a man determined to reform a city by moral regeneration rather than by evangelical conversion. Essentially Eliot seems to be showing us a man who seeks civil sway. He emerges as an unrelieved and obsessive egoist. He is defeated by those who manoeuvre against him politically rather than by any loss of faith in his mission. The disillusion, both with the man and the mission, is represented to us through Romola's disillusion. In her, the disillusion entails something akin to what nineteenth-century readers would recognize as a profound religious crisis:

She spoke almost with bitterness.

'Do you, then, know so well what will further God's Kingdom, father, that you will dare to despise the plea of mercy – of justice – of faithfulness to your own teaching? Has the French King, then, brought renovation to Italy? Take care, father lest your enemies have some reason when they say, that in your visions of what will further God's Kingdom you see only what will strengthen your own party.'

'And that is true!' said Savonarola, with flashing eyes. Romola's voice had seemed to him in that moment the voice of his enemies. 'The cause of my party is the cause of God's Kingdom.'

'I do not believe it!' said Romola, her whole frame shaken with passionate repugnance. 'God's Kingdom is something wider – else, let me stand outside it with the beings that I love.' (59, 499)

Romola rejects both Savonarola's mission and the egotistic, narrowly defined faith which has so restricted that mission. She seeks, she tells, him, 'something wider'. It is also vaguer

Victorian agnostics (if they yet defined themselves as such) would have readily recognized what she is asking for. Romola, as the novel helps define it, has discovered 'a new rebellion ... a new despair' and then she will 'drift away' from Savonarola's restricting influence.

The vision of any great purpose, any end of existence which could ennoble endurance and exalt the common deeds of a dusty life with divine ardours, was utterly eclipsed for her now by the sense of a confusion in human things which made all efforts a mere dragging at tangled threads; all fellowship, either for resistance or advocacy, mere unfairness and exclusiveness. (61, 507)

Though Eliot explicitly tells us that Romola has lost faith in a fellow-man she seems to cling onto 'the faith in the Invisible Goodness'. Of what that 'Invisible Goodness' might consist is to be defined by the process of 'drifting.'

Romola only 'wakes' from her 'drifting' seven chapters later. In the mean time the main drift of the narrative has recounted the fall and destruction of Savonarola and Baldassarre's frenzied murder of Tito. Romola's 'lethargic' sleep as she drifts in the boat detaches her from events in Florence but it ultimately delivers her to a sunlit seashore and the sound of a crying infant. She thus awakens to a new summons of 'love' and 'duty' for she has encountered the plague-stricken, and now dead, exiled Jewish family whose only survivor is a needy child. She picks up the child and walks towards a village where she asks for directions to a well. The subsequent scene is, I believe, a key to George Eliot's redefinitions of faith, action, and ultimately, politics in her novel. She is met in the village by 'a pair of astonished eyes':

Romola certainly presented a sight which, at that moment and in that place, could hardly have been seen without some pausing and palpitation. With her gaze fixed intently on the distant slope, the long lines of her thick grey garment giving a gliding character to her rapid walk, her hair rolling backward and illuminated on the left side by the sun-rays, the little olive baby on her right arm looking out with jet-black eyes, she might well startle that youth of fifteen accustomed to swing the censer in the presence of a Madonna less fair and marvellous than this.

'She carries a picher in her hand – to fetch water for the sick. It is the Holy Mother, come to take care of the people who have the pestilence.' (68, 562)

The boy runs off to fetch the parish priest. It is only very gradually that Romola can assert both her humanity and her human (as opposed to 'divine') requirements. The credulous priest who has been summoned by the boy still half wants to believe in a heavenly apparition:

Only a little while ago, the young acolyte had brought word to the Padre that he had seen the Holy Mother with the Babe, fetching water for the sick: she was as tall as the cypresses, and had a light about her head, and she looked up at the church. The *pievano* had not listened with entire belief: he had been more than fifty years in the world without having any vision of the Madonna, and he thought the boy might have misinterpreted the unexpected appearance of a villager. But he had been made uneasy, and before venturing to come down and milk his cow, he had repeated many Aves. The *pievano's* conscience tormented him a little: he trembled at the pestilence, but he also trembled at the thought of the mild-faced Mother, conscious that that Invisible Mercy might demand something more of him than prayers and 'Hails.' In this state of mind – unable to banish the image the boy had raised of the Mother with the glory about her tending the sick – the *pievano* had come down to milk his cow, and had suddenly caught sight of Romola pausing at the

parted way. Her pleading words, with their strange refinement of tone and accent, instead of being explanatory, had a preternatural sound for him. Yet he did not quite believe he saw the Holy Mother: he was in a state of alarmed hesitation. If anything miraculous were happening, he felt there was no strong presumption that the miracle would be in his favour. He dared not run away; he dared not advance. (68, 563-4)

It is only when Romola puts a cup of milk to the child's mouth that he recognizes the 'Hebrew baby' and assures himself that 'he had a substantial woman before him.' Eliot surely wants us to recall the incident in the Acts of the Apostles where Paul and Barnabas are presumed to be the gods Mercury and Jupiter by the people of Lystra. Paul has to reassure the credulous by insisting: 'We also are men of like passions with you, and bring you good tidings.' (*Acts* 14, 15). In *Romola* the passionate heroine and the reassured priest descend to the sea-shore to help the abandoned and stricken Jewish refugees. They and the re-invigorated (and un-illusioned) villagers proceed to bury the dead and 'in the days and months' that then pass they steadily restore the village back to life. Romola regains her purpose, and her marriage of 'duty' and 'love' is achieved not by prophetic words, or earnest piety, but by practical charitable action. At the end of the chapter Eliot stresses the secular beauty of Romola's mission by unclouding the cloudy mystery in which 'superstition' had briefly buried it:

Many legends were afterwards told in that valley about the blessed Lady who came over the sea, but they were legends by which all who heard might know that in times gone by a woman had done beautiful loving deeds there, rescuing those who were ready to perish. (68, 566)

Eliot may capitalize the word 'Lady' as if the aura of the Madonna still attaches itself to Romola's memory, but essentially she is de-mystifying, secularizing, and offering a rational explication of 'legend.'

Why should this incident, this ostensible 'apparition', loom so largely in *Romola*? It is surely not just that George Eliot wants to stress the heroine's *secular* recovery from the disillusion with Savonarola. Nor is it because the de-mystification of a supposed miracle is singularly apposite to the Positivist argument of the novel. Nor, too, is Romola's action in rescuing and nourishing a Jewish baby, whose parents have been the victims of persecution, a further illustration of Eliot's fascination with Jewish history. That the incident in the Ligurian valley has such narrative prominence lies, I believe, in the fact that apparitions of the Virgin Mary had a particular currency at the time of the novel's composition. Their currency in the 1860s was, moreover, as much political as it was religious.

On 11 February 1858 a fourteen-year-old miller's daughter from the town of Lourdes in south-west France was vouchsafed the first of her visions of the Virgin Mary. Seventeen more were to follow. The apparition appeared in a grotto while the girl was gathering firewood. The figure of '*uo petito damizelo*,' as Bernadette Soubirous later described it in her native Occitan language, did not identify herself until the seventeenth vision on 7 April when the figure told the girl '*Que soy era immaculada councepcion*'. Bernadette claimed that she had no idea what the words meant and always referred to the woman she had seen as '*aquero*' ('that thing'). The 'thing' Bernadette Soubirous saw was a woman, wearing a white veil and a blue girdle; she had a golden rose on each foot and carried a rosary of pearls. Conspicuously, she had no child in her arms. Bernadette's visions were at first received with caution and even scepticism by her neighbours. One assumed that the 'thing' was a *revenant*, a ghost or a lost

soul returned from purgatory. On the fifth appearance of the woman on 20 February thirty villagers were present; on 21 February over a hundred. On 23 February about one hundred and fifty witnesses were assembled near the grotto (including the local tax officer and officers of the local garrison). By early March numbers had grown considerably. Some one and a half thousand people saw the apparition on 1 March and the number rose to nine thousand three days later. During the thirteenth appearance on 2 March the woman told Bernadette to 'go and tell the priests to come here in procession and build a chapel here.' When Bernadette repeated these words to her parish priest he told her she was a liar and forbade her return to the grotto. The priest took the matter to the Bishop of Tarbes and on 8 June the mayor of Lourdes barricaded the grotto and stationed guards to prevent further public access. It was only re-opened in October 1858 by order of the Emperor Napoleon III. In January 1860 the Bishop of Tarbes declared that the apparitions were genuine and formal pilgrimages to the grotto were sanctioned.

We cannot be certain whether or not George Eliot knew anything directly of the apparitions at Lourdes. She may, however, have been alert to the earlier, notorious, manifestations at La Salette near Grenoble in 1846, apparitions of the Virgin which are still not formally sanctioned by the Church but which attracted popular pilgrimage and possessed both a degree of political edge and a whiff of scandal. Murray's *Handbook for Travellers in France* (sixteenth edition 1884) was certainly cynical about pilgrimages to La Salette:

[a village] rendered celebrated for a pretended apparition of the Virgin to a peasant boy of 12 and a girl of 14 ... Sept. 19 1846, at a spot called Sous les Baisses, still higher up in the mountains. A certain Mlle. de Lamerlière was accused, by two priests of Grenoble, of having personated the Virgin, and she failed, both in the Court of First Instance and on appeal, in an action for defamation brought by her against them. In spite of these judicial decisions, the belief in the miracle collects annually to this spot 40 to 60.000 pilgrims, and the sale of the water of a fountain, which was previously dry but burst forth again from the Virgin's tears, produces 12.000 *l.* a year! The stone on which the Virgin was seated, during the interview has been carried off piecemeal by devotees, until nothing remains but the piece preserved in the sanctuary of the church.³

The reason the apparition at La Salette was so notorious was not exclusively the result of the law-suits attached to it, but because of the increasingly politically charged messages supposedly conveyed by the mysterious figure. Mélanie Calvet, the uneducated fourteen-year-old girl who had been addressed by the apparition, remained a highly controversial figure in Imperial France – speaking apocalyptically of a future Antichrist enthroned at Rome, of a Masonic plot to destroy Christian France, and of a potential coup to topple Napoleon III in order to restore the Bourbons. Mélanie Calvet became a postulant nun in 1851 but three years later her local bishop refused to profess her, regarding the girl as immature and her emphatic Royalism as a threat to the religious *status quo*. In 1855 she was invited to England and was professed as a nun in the Carmel at Darlington (though the local bishop banned her from speaking publicly about the secrets she claimed had been imparted to her). She was finally released from her vows in 1867 and settled in southern Italy under the protection of the Bishop of Altamura. The book she published containing many of the 'revelations' she claimed to have received was placed on the Index of Prohibited Books. She died at Altamura in December 1904 and is buried beneath a marble column showing the Virgin's appearance to the two children at

La Salette.

The notoriety of La Salette certainly filtered through to the British press and commentary, as we can see for Murray's *Handbook*, was far from uniformly sympathetic. Protestant prejudices were very much to the fore. In his way Murray is just as scathing when he described Lourdes in the early 1880s (Lourdes being close to the Pyrenees was much more likely to be visited by British tourists in the period though relatively few of those visitors would have been Catholic pilgrims). He notes that the Grotto had become a place of pilgrimage since 1858:

in consequence of the declaration of a girl, Marie Bernadette Soubirous, that the Virgin had several times appeared to her. The girl subsequently became ill, and was taken care of by the Ursuline nuns of Nevers until 1879, when she died. In 6 months of 1859, 150,000 persons visited the Grotto. The spring which is said to have burst forth out of the rock after the apparition is said to have miraculous healing powers, though a chemical analysis has shown that it is only wholesome water, containing no deleterious ingredients. An early Gothic church of no merit, lined inside with *ex votos* was built over the cave in 1868, and several convents have been established near it.⁴

There is no mention here of the Virgin's declaration to Bernadette that she was 'the Immaculate Conception,' a dogma promulgated by Pope Pius IX in December 1854, but this dogma, like the general Catholic response to the apparitions, would have seemed an affront to Protestant sensibilities. The tone of Murray's *Handbook* seems to me to reflect a rational, sceptical Protestant viewpoint which George Eliot was likely to have shared.

What gave the apparitions at La Salette and Lourdes a particular edge, however, was the complex nature of contemporary French politics. If the Emperor Napoleon III was disturbed by the Royalist overtones of the declarations made by Mélanie Calvet, he had no such problem with those of Bernadette Soubirous. Indeed, his re-opening of the grotto in October 1858 was a gesture of support for local Catholic opinion and in line with his policies towards the universal Church. It was the Emperor who, at the time of the composition of *Romola*, was the prime supporter of Pope Pius IX and the upholder of his title to what was left of the Papal States. But, like King Charles VIII in the late fifteenth century, Napoleon III was more than a power broker in Italy; he was regarded by many nationalistic Italians as a wrecker, an interferer, and a force opposed to the best interests of the peninsula. Politics and religion were intertwined and however cynical the Emperor might have seemed to some he was fully aware of the importance of the tacit support of the Catholic hierarchy in France for his regime. Neither the Emperor nor the Pope attracted much fellow-feeling in Britain. English Protestants would certainly have suspected the idea of an apparition who explicitly identified herself with Catholic dogma. Moreover, many of their more extreme brethren looked benevolently on the idea of Italian unification because it was thought likely to entail the end of Papal rule in Rome and therefore to herald the end of the Papacy itself. Garibaldi, the most radical of the leaders of the Risorgimento, enjoyed a determined popularity in Britain, not least amongst Protestants who yearned for the humiliation of a Pope and the end of the reign of a figure they readily identified with the Antichrist.

We can surely recognize echoes of these nineteenth-century conflicts in the picture of fifteenth-century Italy in *Romola*. If the novel as a whole can be seen as a kind of anamnesis – a purposeful act of recall – the scene of *Romola*'s demystification after her disillusion with

Savonarola's mission can properly be placed in a wider religious and political context. At no point in the novel does George Eliot pose as a cynical anti-Catholic, indeed the even-handedness of her account of Savonarola's fraught relationship with the Pope is remarkable. Nor does she ridicule popular religious practice in Italy, however 'superstitious' that practice might have seemed to a Victorian Protestant. What she does subtly achieve is a steady questioning of the sway of a supernatural religion by giving her novel a positivist programme. Romola's 'waking' is therefore more than just an intelligent woman's reaction against Savonarola's dogmatism. It represents a determined 'drift' away from Savonarola's religious influence beyond the limits of fifteenth-century religion and politics, into a nineteenth-century understanding of a practical faith, and practical social morality, which can begin to dispense with the divine dimension and divine imperatives. Romola's is a painful declaration of independence but it carries the weight of something wider and broader than the fifteenth-century context in which it is placed. That independence has a context beyond that of the nineteenth century too. The woman who carries a Jewish child into a Ligurian village is palpable, and not a monitory apparition of a solitary Virgin who does not carry the Christ-child. Romola personally and purposefully undoes illusions by filling the remaining vacuum with practical social action. That social action is a marrying of love and duty the implications of which stretch beyond a narrow religious context and beyond the yearning for a golden age ushered in by the reforming 'Pope Angelico'.

Notes

- 1 *Romola*, ed. Andrew Brown (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), Proem, p. 3. Further references to the chapter and page of the Clarendon Edition will be given in the text.
- 2 *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, ed. Nancy Henry (London: William Pickering, 1994), p. 16.
- 3 *Handbook for Travellers in France*, 2 vols, 16th edn (London: John Murray, 1884), vol. 2, pp. 229-30.
- 4 *Ibid.*, vol 1, p. 352.

Further Reading

- Bonaparte, Felicia, *The Triptych and the Cross: The Central Myths of George Eliot's Poetic Imagination*. Brighton, 1979.
- Bullen, J. B., 'George Eliot's *Romola* as Positivist Allegory', *Review of English Studies*, 26 (1975), 425-35.
- Harris, Ruth, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1999.
- Eds. Caroline Levine and Mark W. Turner, *From Author to Text: Re-reading George Eliot's Romola*. Aldershot, Ashgate Press, 1998.
- Mullen, Peter, *Shrines of Our Lady: A Guide to Fifty of the World's Most Famous Marian Shrines*. London, Piatkus, 1998.
- Sanders, Andrew, *The Victorian Historical Novel 1840-1880*. London, Macmillan, 1978.