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GEORGE ELIOT'S WESLEYAN MADONNA

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George Eliot's "favorite painting in all the world" was Raphael's "Sistine Madonna", which she and George Henry Lewes first viewed at Dresden when she was writing Adam Bede. In her journal, she recorded that on her first sight of the painting she sat down briefly, but then "a sort of awe, as if I were suddenly in the presence of some glorious being, made my heart swell too much for me to remain comfortably, and we hurried out of the room" (Haight 264). Each day as they came to the gallery, they would return last to what Lewes termed "this sublimest picture" (Haight 264).

Hugh Witemeyer, in George Eliot and the Visual Arts, discusses in considerable detail Eliot's artistic taste and knowledge of the visual arts. In commenting on her love for Raphael's "Sistine Madonna" and European portraiture generally, he says that portraiture of course "posed the problem that occupied her as a novelist: how best to represent human beings" (22). After portraiture, she most admired "the sacred and heroic painting of the Italian Renaissance and of Rubens" because there she could see "a union of the ideal with the real that she longed to recapture in her own art" (22). Eliot shared

Lewes' view that "a well-painted face, with a noble expression, is the highest reach of art, as the human soul is the highest thing we know" (Witemeyer 25). Commenting further on her taste, Witemeyer says:

On the one hand, she was culturally predisposed toward Raphael and a Raphaelite norm of beauty - classical, spiritualized, and serene. On the other hand, she could also take pleasure in the style of Rubens - baroque, fleshly and dynamic. (23).

To George Eliot, expression was all-important, being "the gateway to the soul, the mind, the passions, the sentiments, transmitting the invisible life through a visible language of facial and corporal signs" (Witemeyer 27).

Eliot's portrayal of characters in her novels reveals these principles that she recognized and appreciated in the visual arts. In view of her fascination with the madonna-figure, and in particular Raphael's "Sistine Madonna", it is not surprising that she makes use of madonna-figures in her work. Most obvious, of course, are Mrs. Amos Barton, Dorothea Brooke, and Romola, each of whom is explicitly called "Madonna", though in Romola's case this is partly because the term is an Italian form of address. I suggest, however, that another character, created during Eliot's time at Dresden, reflects the madonna qualities as well. I refer to Dinah Morris in Adam Bede.

Dinah is often considered a representative of Christianity generally or even a Christ-figure, because she patterns her life and ministry after Christ, St. Paul, and John Wesley, and at various times identifies with each. But through allusions, imagery, and description, Eliot reveals Dinah also as a madonna, an analogy that illuminates her character, her role in the plot, and her contribution to the ideology of the novel.

Though Dinah does not have children until the end of the novel, and though Eliot makes no explicit reference to Dinah as a madonna, as she does with the women referred to above, there is evidence in Adam Bede that this is at least one way we are to view her. In

Michael Edwards' assertion that "Dinah is likewise not an angel, and even less a Madonna" (214) he alludes to the well-known chapter seventeen ("In Which the Story Pauses a Little") where the narrator says, "Paint us an angel if you can... paint us yet oftener a Madonna, turning her mild face upward and opening her arms to welcome the divine glory..." (224). In this chapter, ostensibly written to explain the character of Mr. Irwine and to comment on the religion of the day - as well as to serve as a treatise on realism - I see (unlike Edwards) that Dinah is reflected also, though she is not named. In Eliot's comment about the nature of art (just quoted) I see in the Madonna's "mild face" and arms open "to welcome the divine glory" an apt description of Dinah. Later, at the party Dinah does not attend, Seth's thoughts of her suggest the same idea:

Dinah had never been more constantly with him than in this scene, where everything was so unlike her. He saw her all the more vividly after looking at the thoughtless faces and gay-coloured dresses of the young women - just as one feels the beauty and the greatness of a pictured Madonna the more, when it has been for a moment screened from us by a vulgar head in a bonnet. (326)

Much later in the novel, as she ministers to the condemned Hetty, Dinah senses "the Divine Pity" beating in her heart (494). And the narrator speaks of her as "a visible pledge of the Invisible Mercy" (505) and "as the only visible sign of love and pity" (507). These comments suggest not only Christ, but also (and much more forcibly) the Virgin Mary as traditionally regarded by the Catholic Church in particular. Certainly it is easy to see such descriptions of Dinah as allusions to Dante's characterization of the Virgin Mary as that most gentle of persons who constantly shows mercy and pity. In Canto XXXIII of the Paradiso, for example, where we have St. Bernard's plea to the Virgin to intercede for Dante, the Virgin is spoken of as "High noon of charity", "A living spring of hope", and "heavenly Queen" (Dante 343-347).

The narrator's comment that "Dinah was too entirely

reliant on the Divine will" is an echo not just of the Saviour's words in Gethsemane but of the Magnificat (Mary's Song) in Luke 2. Perhaps these allusions that suggest either Mary or Christ support the idea of Dinah as a representative of Christianity generally, and also reinforce the portrayal of her personal struggles with just what her role and destiny are: to be a preacher, on the one hand, in the tradition of Christ, St. Paul, and John Wesley, or to be a wife and mother instead.

Eric Trudgill, in Madonnas and Magdalens, discusses the madonna-cult in the mid-nineteenth century, as it related to "the origins and development of Victorian sexual attitudes", commenting that

For the Victorian idealist frightened by sex, devoted to motherhood, and troubled by religious doubts, the Virgin Mother, as a feminine archetype, combined immaculate sexual purity, perfect motherly love and a vehicle for pent-up religious emotions. (257)

Even a "madonna-look" became popular – a woman with hair parted on the temples, and with a mild, soft innocent appearance. Trudgill notes, however, that at times the term denoted a moral rather than a visual relevance, as when Robert Louis Stevenson and George Henry Lewes frequently used the term with their loved ones, Mrs. Sitwell and George Eliot – who certainly did not look like madonnas! (Trudgill 258) And apparently Eliot herself saw the Madonna as "a kind of answer to the problem of evil: she was thoroughly captivated by the idea of woman represented by the Virgin" (263).

Certainly Dinah's appearance, manner, voice, and goodness cause her to fit this image which seems to convey both holiness and sensuality, spirit and flesh, in ideal form. The narrator speaks of her "seraphic gentleness of expression" (118) and her "sweet pale face" (492); the stranger/traveler notes her "feminine delicacy", the "absence of self-consciousness", and the "charm of Dinah's mellow treble tones" (66–71). Lisbeth sees "a face, a pure, pale face, with loving gray eyes", and thinks Dinah is an angel (154). Others refer to her as pretty, pleasant looking, and sweet,

with Arthur commenting that she looks "like St. Catherine, a type of face one rarely sees among our common people" (106). Mr. Irwine knows that the reason even the roughest men do not bother her as she preaches is "though she doesn't know it... there's so much tenderness, refinement, and purity about her. Such a woman as that brings with her 'airs from heaven' that the coarsest fellow is not insensible to" (320).

Flower imagery in Dinah's characterization strengthens the madonna analogy as well, as Eliot uses traditional symbols for the Virgin Mary as seen in Dante and in Renaissance art generally. In the description of Dinah the preacher (chapter two), the narrator says that "her face seemed to gather a calm vividness, like flowers at evening," and "it was one of those faces that make one think of white flowers with light touches of colour on their pure petals" (67). Later, when Dinah is in the prison with Hetty, we are told that "the sweet pale face in the cap was more than ever like a white flower on this background of gloom" (492). Then there are several more specific references. Adam comments to Seth: "I don't wonder at thee for loving her, Seth. She's got a face like a lily" (167). And on the day of her wedding, "the lily face looked out with sweet gravity..." (578). According to George Ferguson, the lily, a symbol of purity and chastity, is the flower of the Virgin Mary: "In many of the scenes of the Annunciation painted during the Renaissance, the Archangel Gabriel holds a lily, or a lily is placed on a vase between the Virgin and the Announcing Angel" (Ferguson 33-34). The white rose, in Renaissance art, is also a symbol of purity, and in Dante's Divine Comedy (Paradiso, Canto XXX) the white rose, or celestial rose, is the symbol of divine love. In Canto XXIII, 1. 72-73 the rose refers to the Virgin Mary, and the lilies to the Apostles.

It is not difficult to see, as one looks at a copy of Raphael's "Sistine Madonna", the reflection of Dinah Morris, and to remember that as George Eliot was writing Adam Bede (or a large part of it) she was going daily to the gallery in Dresden to gaze at this painting.

Throughout Adam Bede, Dinah's love for children and theirs for her is shown. While this is not unusual, Eliot seems to emphasize it, and perhaps not simply to present a contrast to Hetty's dislike of children. Not only is Dinah evidently fond of the obstreperous Totty, and Totty of her (192-3; 437), but children generally respond to her whether they know her or not. For example, Seth tells Adam (548) about Dinah's preaching "at Brimstone's", saying that a small boy stood looking at her, "'with's mouth open, and presently he run away from's mother and went up to Dinah, and pulled at her, like a little dog, for her to take notice of him. So Dinah lifted him up and held th' lad on her lap while she went on speaking; and he was as good as could be till he went t'sleep...'" Adam replies that "'It's a pity she shouldna be a mother herself... so fond as the children are of her.'" (548) An interesting point in contrast is that earlier, during Dinah's preaching on the Hayslope green (chapter two), we are told that the children had wandered off as the service became long. Is this small contrast yet another indication of Dinah's changing role, in becoming the madonna rather than the preacher? Curiously, the plot line, with Dinah's marriage and motherhood supplying the controversial conclusion, illustrates, in reverse order, what happened to the role of women in the nineteenth century, when there was a definite movement from the madonna ideal to an emerging feminism. George Eliot in Adam Bede portrays an independent heroine with a career moving to the traditional role. From one point of view, Dinah succumbs to society's mores, though from another she illustrates an aspect of her creator's own philosophy.

To Ludwig Feuerbach, whose The Essence of Christianity Eliot translated, and whose humanist philosophy she seemed to fully accept, theology was, of course, anthropology. Thus Feuerbach explains the various Christian doctrines and mysteries accordingly. His ideas, and Eliot's use of them, have been discussed by numerous critics. What I wish to suggest in relation to Dinah as a Wesleyan Madonna is simply that in this change in Dinah's role, and presumably in her self-concept and understanding of "the divine will", we can see Feuerbach's view of the importance of "the idea of

the Mother of God" in the idea of a trinity, for, as he says, "we can perceive this love (of God) still better when we find in God the beating of a mother's heart. The highest and deepest love is the mother's love" (Feuerbach 72). He claims that Protestantism is the poorer because of setting aside the idea of "the Mother of God", for "Love is in and by itself essentially feminine in its nature. The belief in the love of God is the belief in the feminine principle as divine." Moreover, the idea of a Trinity is meaningless without the feminine being. The Trinity idea, Feuerbach claims, has in Protestantism thus "lost first its practical, and ultimately its theoretical significance" (73).

In Dinah, Eliot subtly reveals her Feuerbachian philosophy through portraying her as a woman who - though from beginning to end a Christian and a Wesleyan - moves from what could be seen basically a male role to a female one which is just as "divine" and even more effective in expressing human sympathy and love. She realizes, finally, that a deep human love, for which she has (unconsciously) longed, in part fills the need for a "concrete" God, and she thus illustrates Feuerbach's conviction about the importance of the feminine principle in religion.

While many readers accuse Eliot of departing from her own feminist principles in her portrayal of Dinah, others recognize that in spite of her independence and her extra-marital union with Lewes, George Eliot was, in many ways, a traditionalist and a woman with deep-seated emotional needs. She accepted wholeheartedly, and easily, Feuerbach's emphasis on the significance of love and marriage.

Certainly Dinah is, as most critics agree, the major embodiment of love in Adam Bede, and it is this, and not her Christian doctrines, that causes people to respond to her. It is the woman, says Feuerbach, who best expresses feeling and deep love. And so Dinah has found her true destiny, accepting another kind of "divine activity" than what she had envisioned for herself, one in accord with Christianity, and with the nineteenth century ideal of womanhood, as well as with the humanism of Feuerbach. Dinah, then, may be

viewed as a Methodist Madonna who is a composite of Dante's Virgin Mary, the Roman Catholic's Mother of God, the Protestant's Mother of Jesus, Feuerbach's feminine principle, and the mid-nineteenth century ideal woman. In her we see holiness and sensuality in ideal form, that of a woman whose "sublime feelings" make her a powerful moral force within Adam Bede.

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Dinah (the 'Wesleyan Madonna') with Adam:
an early illustration, from *A New Edition*
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