

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

1993

Review of Romola

Andrew Brown

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

Brown, Andrew, "Review of Romola" (1993). *The George Eliot Review*. 228.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/228>

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.

Graham Handley***Romola*, the Clarendon Edition of the Novels of George Eliot, edited by Andrew Brown (Clarendon Press, 1993)**

George Eliot wrote of *Romola* in 1877 that she 'could swear by every sentence as having been written with my best blood.' *Romola* was the only historical novel she ever wrote, and the editor of the Clarendon edition, Andrew Brown, describes it as 'the least accessible of her works of fiction' as far as the general reader is concerned. It is what he calls 'a formidably learned book', and his superb introduction traces the formidable amount of research George Eliot undertook for it. He indicates the anguish involved in its writing, its initial critical reception and the number of editions published in the author's lifetime together with a host of other relevant and fascinating information. This edition is dedicated, exemplary: it was many years in the making, and I trust that the editor will not misconstrue my emphasis when I say that it is the key to all *Romola*.

A fortnight's holiday in Florence in 1860 apparently signalled the first movement towards her subject. George Eliot's early comments, as one might expect from one so diffident, are guarded, so much so that she does not consider publishing it (if it is written) before she has completed 'another English story'. There is no question at this stage of her leaving her publisher John Blackwood, for she feels that it should appear in *Maga*. By 10 March 1861 she has delivered the final pages of the English story (*Silas Marner*) to him, and Lewes recorded in his Journal that they were 'talking of the Italian Romance that Polly is contemplating'. On 19 April they set out for Florence: Andrew Brown reconstructs 'the course of their research there through the survival of their borrowing slips in the Magliabecchian Library. They researched the city too, spending there, according to the entry in George Eliot's Journal 'thirty-four days of precious time'. After they arrived home she studied the background, suffering as so often from periodic headaches and depression.

By mid-August 1861 the main plot-line appears to have been resolved. The autumn was spent in detailed reading, but she continued to be undermined by intermittent ill-health, and little writing was done. By December her self-doubts were deeply entrenched. Andrew Brown looks closely at her relevant notebooks, indicating her chief sources and his own easy familiarity with them. His evaluations are invaluable: her word-for-word liftings and her individual departures are succinctly noted. At last she began *Romola*, on New Year's Day 1862.

George Smith, publisher of the *Cornhill* magazine, courted the services of Lewes but undoubtedly had his now famous partner in mind. Brown says in fact he 'clearly had larger game in his sights', and by 23 January 1862 Smith had made his 'magnificent offer', later given as £10000. But he wanted the novel to begin publication in the *Cornhill* in May of that year, an impossibility for George Eliot. Smith did not give up. He appointed Lewes as consultant editor of the magazine at £50 per number on 8 May, and it was soon agreed that the serialization of *Romola* would begin in July in twelve parts instead of the original sixteen, for a payment of £7000. George Eliot would retain the copyright after six years.

The news of her contract with Smith was broken to her friend and previous publisher John Blackwood on 19 May. Although Blackwood referred to 'the voracity of Lewes' in a private letter to his London manager Langford, he behaved with dignity and tolerance publicly and when he later visited George Eliot and Lewes. Andrew Brown notes that 'the serial form did not suit her', but that now she had to 'deliver the goods' for Smith. He covers the interesting exchanges between George Eliot and her illustrator Frederic Leighton, and also notes Trollope's letter of praise for the first number of the novel in which, however, he cautions George Eliot 'Do not fire too much over the heads of your readers'. *Romola* was published in fourteen monthly parts from July 1862 to August 1863. George Eliot's much quoted 'I began it a young woman' – I finished it an old woman' sufficiently indicates her dedication and her suffering. For the modern and future George Eliot scholar this is an indispensable edition. Andrew Brown examines some contemporary reviews, delves the publishing history of the novel up to 1880 (the year of George Eliot's death), includes 84 pages of explanatory notes, an appendix on the cancelled epigraphs: he also provides the reader with a list of George Eliot's preparatory reading, a glossary of Italian words, and Leighton's 'vignettes framing the capitals at the start of each of the fourteen *Cornhill* serial parts'. It is monumental but exciting. Indeed, the greatest compliment I can pay Andrew Brown is to say that his own research and learning balance George Eliot's at every turn, and sometimes sit more lightly. George Eliot has recently become, through the BBC 2 filming of *Middlemarch*, something of a visual icon. That is the wrong emphasis. Her glory and achievement lie in printed words on a page. This edition gives us not only *Romola* in its entirety, but also the real George Eliot.