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## University of London, Centre for English Studies: Conference Report

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**UNIVERSITY OF LONDON,  
CENTRE FOR ENGLISH STUDIES:  
CONFERENCE REPORT**  
by Caroline Levine and Mark Turner

George Eliot claimed that *Romola* was written with her 'best blood', and her contemporaries certainly knew and appreciated the novel. Until late in the century *Romola* was even being regularly employed as a guidebook to Florence. But despite contemporary uses and accolades, the text has been largely overlooked by scholars, who have typically relegated the novel to footnotes and fleeting allusions. In response to this neglect, admirers of *Romola* have begun to ask why it has attracted so little scholarly attention, given its thematic and theoretical abundance, its cultural and critical complexity.

In the spirit of what we perceive as a growing enthusiasm for *Romola*, we decided to convene a group of scholars at the University of London's Centre for English Studies to reevaluate this central Eliot text, and to consider why it might have been so categorically consigned to critical oblivion. The theme of the conference was thus 'Reviving *Romola*'.

Professor Barbara Hardy – whose celebrated studies of George Eliot's fiction will be well known to Eliot readers – opened the conference with a reading of the affective and psychological complexities of *Romola*. Principally, she explored the relations between Eliot's uses of Florence as a setting for psychological events and the emotional life of the novel's characters, to reveal the subtle connections fashioned between outer and inner worlds. Excepting these moments, however, Hardy argued that *Romola* was ultimately a laborious text, too densely researched and obtrusively 'archeologized' to flow easily as narrative.

'Visions and Voices', the panel that followed this challenge to *Romola* enthusiasts, was rich in counter-arguments. Beryl Gray opened this session with 'Power and Persuasion: the Voices of Influence in *Romola*', an attention to the 'soundtrack' of *Romola* – the tones and voices, Orphic and Bacchic, that permeate and enrich the text. She argued that the flexible, honeyed liquidity of Tito's voice is an index of his too-pliant morality, while Savonarola's biblical expressiveness is the predominant voice of authority and conviction.

In the context of an interest in Henry James, Chris Greenwood explored questions of vision and authority in *Romola*, placing Eliot's exploration of vision in a broad intellectual context. Within this framework, he argued that successful understanding within the novel is predicated on a proper observation of the world; characters must learn how to read visual evidence in order to accomplish their aims. But as Greenwood suggested, Eliot's narrator actually claims ultimate interpretive authority, outdoing her characters' attempts to make sense of the visual world they encounter.

Last in this panel was Mark Turner, whose paper, the 'Visual Text', contrasted Frederic Leighton's representations of *Romola* and Tessa in the *Cornhill* edition of *Romola*.

Leighton's images of Romola herself change significantly over the course of the serialization, and she is envisioned as a Madonna and as a public, philanthropic figure, while Tessa is seen against a background of private domesticity, with all of the trappings of contented motherhood. Turner then considered these images in the context of the periodical as a whole, where 'fallen women', single women, and mothers are represented in ways that together reveal the patterns, complexities, and constructions of cultural paradigms of femininity.

Opening a panel entitled 'The Forces of Conviction', Professor David Carroll set *Romola* in a rather different context: considering a tradition of nineteenth-century novels about saints and martyrs – including Cardinal Newman's *Callista* and Kingsley's *Hypatia* – Carroll argued that in *Romola* Eliot actually rewrote the conventional novel of martyrdom. Here, martyrdom is not an act of consummate faith, but of internal conflict, represented by the historical figure of Savonarola. Like the martyrs in the religious novels in the 1850s, Savonarola is initially torn, becoming a 'sacred rebel' and then undergoing trial, torture, and confession; but when Savonarola admits error at the end, this is not, in Eliot, the sign of a failure, but a revision of martyrdom itself.

This paper was followed by Caroline Levine's discussion of the 'Prophetic Fallacy', where she considered the novel as a *Bildungsroman*, educating its heroine to moral responsibility and an understanding of the ways of the world. In this process, the text attempts to discredit the persuasive voices of the prophets, implying that prophecy is arbitrary compared to the lessons of experience. But narrative, a temporal form that was shown to share a fundamental structural kinship with the voices of prophecy, ultimately reveals – in its very attempts to reject the prophets – that its own means of persuasion are equally arbitrary.

Professor Andrew Sanders led 'Editing *Romola*: Text and Context', the last panel of the day, which focused on the pleasures and vexations of editing the novel. In fact, it is Sanders who deserves the real credit for the text's recent rejuvenation, having persuaded Penguin to reprint *Romola* in 1980. Joining him in this session were Andrew Brown, editor of the invaluable Clarendon *Romola*, and Leonee Ormond, who is preparing the forthcoming Everyman Paperbacks edition.

Ormond focused her paper on source material: which paintings had Eliot seen and used for the densely pictorial *Romola*? Tracing the thematic complexity of iconography in the text, Ormond discussed images of St Michael, Bacchus, and the Madonna to show how the pictures cited in the text weave an intricate web of meanings beneath the plotted surface of the novel.

Andrew Brown showed that the dynamic prose rhythms of George Eliot's manuscript were in fact erased when her punctuation and grammar were standardized for the serialization, and have never been the basis for an edition of *Romola*. Some of the potential dreariness of the writing, he explained, was thus due to the normalizing influence of edi-

torial standards, rather than to the author's own style. He also drew attention to the copious research that Eliot undertook for the writing of *Romola*, and argued that the text, which is absolutely mired in unacknowledged historical 'accuracy', offers an intriguing study of creativity, combining striking erudition with the inventiveness of fiction.

Finally, our thanks, as conference organizers, are due to Warren Chernaik and Rebecca Dawson at the Centre for English Studies for helping to make the conference such a well attended and successful event.