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Review of From Author to Text: Re-reading George Eliot's *Romola*; George Eliot and Italy: Literary, Cultural and Political Influences from Dante to the Risorgimento

Caroline Levine

Mark W. Turner

Andrew Thomsson

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Caroline Levine and Mark W. Turner (eds.),
From Author to Text: Re-reading George Eliot's Romola
(Ashgate, 1998), pp. xii + 217. ISBN 1 84014 258 8. £45

Andrew Thompson, *George Eliot and Italy:*
Literary, Cultural and Political Influences from Dante to the Risorgimento
(Macmillan, 1998). ISBN 0 333 694 562. £45

Each of these books took me by surprise. There is a curious tension between the incorporativeness of Andrew Thompson's title, *George Eliot and Italy*, and his compendiously specific sub-title, *Literary, Cultural and Political Influences from Dante to the Risorgimento*, which somehow led me to expect something like a descriptive catalogue of alleged influences. Instead, I found a book which indeed has awkwardnesses, but which pursues an argument and offers valuable illumination of George Eliot's whole career (and not just *Romola*, as might easily be assumed). Barbara Hardy memorably observed in 1959 that '*Romola* is undoubtedly a book which it is more interesting to analyse than simply to read', an opinion to which I still subscribe after a fashion which has been profoundly qualified by the collection of essays on *Romola* assembled by Caroline Levine and Mark W. Turner, which added to other work on the novel in recent years makes it impossible 'simply to read' *Romola*. Levine and Turner and their contributors challenge the whole range of judgements and assumptions about the novel of which George Eliot herself declared 'I began it a young woman, I finished it an old woman'.

Professor Hardy appears only once in the index to Levine and Turner, a fact which is itself an index of the extent to which the least canonized of George Eliot's works is here examined by a group of scholars who are mainly 'early career', but which includes some prominent champions of our author: Andrew Brown, editor of the Clarendon *Romola*, carrying forward with erudition and energy a debate on his decision about copytext that depends on punctuation and is none the less intensely engaging; Beryl Gray, who has heard more in George Eliot than most, attuning readers to the 'soundtrack' of *Romola*; David Carroll, magisterially examining martyrology; and Leonee Ormond, making a distinguished and meticulous contribution to our understanding of George Eliot's researches for this novel, especially in the visual arts. Indeed, the visual and visualization in *Romola* come in for a good deal of attention, in Mark W. Turner's well-informed and provocative examination of the illustrations and their significance in the *Cornhill* serialization, and in Chris Greenwood's subtle discussion of 'the educated attentive eye' (167). The most difficult essay (and hence perhaps the most satisfying, despite some stiff competition) is Caroline Levine's which brilliantly executes a sophisticated conceptual strategy that resonates against the work of George Levine (no relation) on George Eliot's realism. Essays by Shona Elizabeth Simpson, Julian Corner, and Susan M. Bernardo, grouped as 'Rethinking the Heroine', take widely different approaches, offering readings through ideas of spatiality, contemporary psychology, and the power of naming, which variously illuminate both *Romola* and *Romola*. Andrew Brown's essay begins with the confronting suggestion (to which it is difficult not to give assent) that 'In all probability, fewer than a dozen people have ever read *Romola* exactly as George Eliot herself wrote it' (37). The project of this volume is to demonstrate ways *Romola* is to be read in other contexts than that of the author

and her career. There is a sense in which the editors perhaps protest too much about the radicalness of their initiative, but the measure of their achievement must be the extent to which the enthusiasm articulated in their introduction carries through the volume into illumination of the novel. Joanne Shattock and Vincent Newey, editors of the Ashgate series, *The Nineteenth Century*, have once again commissioned a valuable work.

The style of Andrew Thompson's *George Eliot and Italy* is initially at least wordy and anxious, and some awkwardness of exposition continues throughout (chapter 5, note 1 is an example: material which looks as if it's been exported from the main text). The spelling out of the concerns of his study in the introduction is a bit laboured, but by the end of chapter 1 the central propositions of his thesis have emerged clearly: namely that by 'placing Eliot's work in relation to currents of Risorgimento thought and Victorian sensibility towards Dante', the influence both of the Risorgimento and of her wider experience of Italy and its culture may be examined fruitfully (29). Chapter 1 is a useful overview of Italian history in the nineteenth century, a complicated set of narratives of which it is not easy to find a summary account, together with closer definition of his key terms, 'Dante' and 'the Risorgimento'. I gained particular benefit from the account of Dante's reputation especially in relation to the Risorgimento: and incidentally, 'Dante' is not in Levine and Turner's index, though there are two references to 'Risorgimento', both in Carroll's essay. Chapter 2 gives George Eliot scholars more of a feel for Thompson's capacities, in an overview of her contact with Italian life and culture 1840-61, making relevant use of her journalism — Thompson includes her reviews, to particularly good effect. I can't resist commenting that it's a pity he had not the opportunity to refer to *The Journals of George Eliot*, ed. Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston, 1998. Also that the bibliography includes items as late as 1996, but not Rosemary Ashton's 1996 biography, nor Rosemarie Bodenheimer's *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans* of 1994, nor Andrew Brown's Clarendon edition of *Romola*, 1993. Still, the work is thorough if at times worryingly inaccurate (one example, but not an isolated one: it was the artist Frederic Burton, not Leighton, who accompanied the Leweses to Italy in 1864 — see p. 182).

All this notwithstanding, the considerable strength of this book derives from Thompson's expertise in Italian language and literature, and his often insightful discussions. The novels to which most attention is devoted are *Romola* (two chapters which convincingly make their case, the centrepiece of the argument) and *Daniel Deronda* (three chapters, which open up interesting and original analogies between the Dante/Risorgimento material and the Jewish theme), with single chapters on 'Mr Gilfil's Love-Story', *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*. Thompson's work on *Scenes of Clerical Life* is a pertinent reminder of the fact that George Eliot's early work was not exclusively 'domestic'. His account of *Felix Holt* essentially expands orthodox accounts, and similarly the *Middlemarch* chapter is a fairly conventional discussion of 'Italian culture and influences'. This book takes an initiative, and Andrew Thompson's demonstration of his thesis about 'George Eliot and Italy' is to be welcomed as a contribution to George Eliot studies.

Margaret Harris
University of Sydney