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Arguably the most problematic episode of Romola for the novel’s reviewers and critics is Romola’s imitation of Boccaccio’s heroine Costanza (or Gostanza) in the two chapters ‘Drifting Away’ and ‘Romola’s Waking’; even Romola’s most favourable early reviews censured the episode’s structural and stylistic interruption. However, as Mark Turner and Caroline Levine have observed, the critical consensus has evolved from censure of ‘an unseemly breach in the narrative’ to reappraisal of a ‘crucial site of interest’. If an unwritten orthodoxy remains then it is a less value-laden sense that the chapters depart from the novel’s overarching historical project. However, it is possible to synthesize this problematic deviation with the overall design by mapping the episode onto its medieval origin and reading Romola, if only for two chapters, as one of a long line of medieval ancestresses, rather than a transposed Victorian heroine. Perhaps the chapters seem disconnected because it is here that George Eliot manages most completely to adopt a medieval narrative logic and exceeds the limits of the Victorian historical novel.

Criticism of the Costanza episode can be roughly divided into that which emphasizes its incongruity, and that which attempts to reintegrate it into the novel. The Westminster Review, though mostly well-disposed to Romola, was critical of the design of the relevant chapters, noting that they were ‘strangely disconnected with the rest of the tale’. Echoing the Westminster Review’s disapproval, George Levine reads the Costanza episode as an unconscionable intrusion, an obvious intervention, incongruous in a historical novel.

The completion of the symbolic pattern is clear enough. But even more clear is the fact that George Eliot herself has put justice in the world. Her own great yearning for it sought a method by which to embody it: the method was romance.

Dorothea Barrett’s introduction to the Penguin edition of Romola similarly treats both chapters as a conscious interruption, an attempt to introduce a ‘utopian element’. In contrast, some recent criticism has attempted to reintegrate the chapters into the overall design. For Shona Elizabeth Simpson the episode marks the climax of Romola’s ongoing ‘negotiation’ with her environment, plotted as a progression from her father’s library, to open streets, to the countryside. ‘Romola’s Waking’ enacts Romola’s rebirth in a space not controlled by others in which she can establish her own destiny. Any incoherence in the novel is introduced not by this episode but by the concluding scene, where Romola promises tuition to Tito’s son but not his daughter. Julian Corner describes a psychological history that traces Romola’s problems back to the traumatic loss of her mother; Romola is completely dissociated from her environment, and her compulsion to set herself adrift is the fulfillment of desire that has been expressed throughout the novel. If there is discontinuity in these chapters, then this is actually compatible with Romola’s fundamental alienation throughout the novel.

An interpretation of Romola that attempts to resituate this problematic episode within a
medieval literary context might be able to reconcile the ostensible discontinuity between the historic and romantic sections of the book, and consequently mediate between the two critical positions sketched above. Boccaccio’s version of the Costanza tale is but one of many variants; Margaret Schlauch has compiled a fairly exhaustive list of these variants of the Constance tale,\(^8\) while J. R. Reinhard has discussed a range of medieval accounts of people being set adrift, including versions of the Constance tale.\(^9\) The ‘Constance-cycle’ employs both a historical and a symbolic register, just as Romola does; mapping Romola onto this medieval cycle as opposed to referring solely to Boccaccio may reveal a level of allusion not immediately apparent to the reader, nor indeed, to Romola as reader.

The most familiar of the Constance tales in the nineteenth-century were Boccaccio’s ‘Costanza’ from the Decameron,\(^10\) Chaucer’s ‘The Man of Law’s Tale’,\(^11\) John Gower’s ‘Constance’ from the Confessio Amantis,\(^12\) and the anonymous Middle English romance ‘Emaré’.\(^13\) It is probable that Eliot was cognizant of the connection between Boccaccio’s Costanza, Chaucer’s Custance, and the numerous variants. She reviewed the 1855 Robert Bell edition of Chaucer’s works for the Westminster Review;\(^14\) Bell states in his introduction to the ‘Man of Law’s Tale’ that it is most probably one of a family of tales including ‘Emaré’ and Confessio Amantis, all derived from an unknown French romance.\(^15\) Eliot also possessed a copy of the 1857 edition of Gower’s Confessio Amantis edited by Reinhold Pauli\(^16\) in which Pauli’s introduction emphasises the connection between Chaucer and Gower’s versions.\(^17\)

Boccaccio’s Costanza is Romola’s acknowledged inspiration and the parallels with Romola’s situation are clear. Romola, unable to ‘seek death’ in the ‘fullness of her young life’, recalls the tale of ‘Gostanza’, ‘which had been one of the things she had loved to dwell on in Boccaccio’ while her father slept.\(^18\) In Boccaccio’s tale Costanza is distraught when she hears the mistaken report that her lover has drowned. She resolves to commit suicide, but ‘as she could not bring herself to take her life by violent means’ she rows out to sea, then throws away the oars and rudder, leaving herself ‘at the wind’s mercy’ (Decameron, p. 329). Having set herself adrift, she ‘wrapped a cloak round her head and lay down, weeping, in the bottom of the boat’ (Decameron, p. 329). Like Romola, the sea brings her safely to shore in a strange land. Romola’s memory of the tale is ‘a mere thought’ but once it has been revived she recalls the heroine’s despair, disinclination for self-violence and consequent choice of sea-exposure as a method, and how she had lain down in the boat and ‘wrapt her mantle round her head’ (Romola, p. 507). The close reference to Boccaccio’s tale, where the heroine’s act is an unambiguous suicide attempt, partly justifies that criticism of Romola which reads this chapter as an equally unambiguous suicide attempt, but this interpretation is complicated if the chapter is read with reference to the alternate English Constance tales.

The three English versions are all much longer than Boccaccio’s short tale, and treat Constance as a secular saint. Chaucer’s ‘Custance’ is an icon of fortitude, set adrift in a ‘ship al steeereless’ (‘Man of Law’: 439) by her Syrian mother-in-law, who is enraged by her son’s conversion to Christianity in order to marry the beautiful Custance. In her predicament, Chaucer commends Custance to God the good pilot: ‘Lord of Fortune be thy steere!’ (‘Man of Law’: 448). She prays to Christ, begging that he protect her from the Devil when she ‘shal drenchen in the depe’ (‘Man of Law’: 455). She drifts for more than three years, preserved from drowning and starvation by ‘No wight but Crist’ (‘Man of Law’: 501), and is finally driven ashore in
Northumberland, where she begs the man who finds her to kill her, though she repents when she sets foot on land. A series of miracles convert the Northumbrians to Christianity. Custance marries King Alla, but falls prey to her second mother-in-law, who arranges for Custance to be set adrift in her old ship, this time with her new-born son. Custance again puts her trust in Christ who ‘kan me kepe from harm and eek fro shame / In salte see’ (‘Man of Law’: 829-30). On this second exposure she drifts for over five years, before all are reconciled in Rome.

Gower’s version of the tale is essentially the same as Chaucer’s, but places greater emphasis on Constance’s role as a catalyst for baptism and less on the miracle of her preservation. In Gower’s version she attracts the attention of the Sultan only after she has converted the greatest of Barbarie to Christianity (Confessio, p. 179). Events follow Chaucer’s tale, but in contrast to Chaucer’s Custance, whose response to her second exposure is a prayer and an angry ‘Farewel, housbonde routheles!’ (‘Man of Law’: 863), Gower’s Constance experiences a fleeting moment of despair when she ‘gan to wepe / Swounend as dede’ (Confessio, p. 195). However, the sight of her child inspires her to persevere. The story concludes in a similar way to ‘The Man of Law’s Tale’.

The eponymous heroine of ‘Emare’ is a more passive heroine than the Constances. Emare is set adrift in a boat ‘Wythowte anker or ore’ (‘Emare’: 275), not by her mother-in-law but by her father after she rejects his incestuous advances. Unlike the other Constances, Emare is provided with ‘Nothur mete ne drynke’ (‘Emare’: 272) and experiences real physical hardship. She suffers in terrible seas, ‘dryven wyth wynde and rayn / Wyth stronge stormes her agayn’ (‘Emare’: 316-17). Her response is to hide at the bottom of the boat: ‘She hyd her heede and lay fulllowe’ (‘Emare’: 323), a reaction which is present in Boccaccio’s version but is absent from Chaucer and Gower’s variants. Her reaction to her second exposure (this time by her mother-in-law) is to cover her face with her robe, lie down at the bottom of the boat, and pray. She is driven for a week and arrives at Rome ‘For hungur and thurste allmost madde’ (‘Emare’: 683). The story concludes as in Gower and Chaucer’s tales.

Gower’s Constance and Chaucer’s Custance are never safer than when they are at sea, under the protection of Christ the good pilot. Constance, Custance and Emare resign their ability to act, and hence their responsibility for their own safety, when put out to sea. The rudderless boat is a common motif in medieval literature, representing God’s omnipotence in his ability to control the most unpredictable element, the sea, and also signifying the necessity of faith. Emare’s immobility when faced with danger represents the correct Christian response to the threat of immediate death. When Boccaccio’s Costanza covers her face it is an action of fear and despair; when Emare covers her face she is afraid, but she is also demonstrating her faith in God by renouncing participation in her fate. This is not despair, it is the active resignation of self-responsibility to God. Interestingly, Bell’s introduction to ‘The Man of Law’s Tale’ emphasizes just this aspect of the tale, describing it as an ‘exquisitely touching picture of resignation, founded upon Christian faith and hope’. If Emare, Constance or Custance were to struggle against their fate then this would imply that they did not have faith in the ability of Christ to rescue or redeem them. Romola might not be aware of the Christian moral of the Constance tale, but Eliot would have been. Romola thinks she is imitating a suicidal heroine when she sets herself adrift, but her interpretation of her act actually oscillates within the chapter between despair and the unhappy resignation of the English Constances. For example,
the lure of the boat is not solely its potential as a vehicle for suicide.

To be freed from the burden of choice when all motive was bruised, to commit herself, sleeping, to destiny which would either bring death or else new necessities that might rouse a new life in her! — it was a thought that beckoned her the more because the soft evening air made her long to rest in the still solitude, instead of going back to the noise and heat of the village. (Romola, p. 509).

Romola, like the Constances, renounces responsibility for her fate. In its medieval context, such an act is not as evidently suicide as it might have seemed to a nineteenth-century, or indeed twentieth-century, reader. V. A. Kolve has discussed the tradition of 'peregrinatio pro amore Dei' or 'white martyrdom', in which the martyr sets himself adrift. 20 A white martyr does not commit suicide, for they do not bring about their own death; as Kolve explains, 'these persons discover the Providence that lies behind Fortune by abandoning themselves to Fortune, by refusing to will the direction of their journey'. 21 If God wishes white martyrs to die then he will prevent their rescue, but if God wishes them to live he will protect them. This medieval logic seems applicable to Romola’s act in that hers is an act of resignation rather than active self-destruction, although Fate may have to be substituted for God as the decider of Romola’s fate.

Kolve has also discussed the iconic significance of the boat in ‘The Man of Law’s Tale’, noting that the tale’s original audience would have recognized Custance’s voyages as journeys of ‘the Ship of the Church bringing true faith to “hethenesse”’; arguing that the idea of the Ship of the Church is derived from imagery of adult baptism in the aftermath of the spread of the Church throughout Western Europe. 22 Certainly, in the English Constance tales the heroine is effectively a secular saint, an allusion that accords with David Carroll’s interpretation of ‘Romola’s Awakening’, which posits that the chapter enacts a secular baptism and sanctification. 23 This is particularly coherent with Gower’s version of the tale, which portrays Constance as a female Baptist spreading the word of God via a literal ‘Ship of the Church’. Traces of Gower’s Constance are present in Romola. As Romola wakens, she wishes for ‘the soothing sense of peace and beauty which she had felt in her first waking’ (Romola, p. 555), but is recalled to her humanitarian duty by a child’s cry. She becomes a combination of Constance and the Madonna, ‘come over the sea to help those who are left alive’ (Romola, p. 561). There is no parallel for this in Boccaccio, but there is in Gower where Constance’s faith falters for a moment before she is recalled to her duty to survive for her child. Romola also echoes Constance in her refusal to give her name (the Constance figures never reveal their identities until the final reconciliation) and her adoption of Constance’s role as a traveller come to reveal the truths of Christianity, here to a village that observes only the forms of religion rather than to pagans. Her role as Constance/Baptist culminates in the baptism of Benedetto.

Kolve makes the important point that ‘Chaucer’s first audiences […] would not have thought the story of Custance a fiction at all: they would have perceived it as history’. 24 Romola, however, encounters the tale as a nineteenth-century reader would have, as recreational and escapist. Costanza’s tale is a refuge for Romola, a rare alternative to the historical scholarship of Bardo’s library. Therefore, according to Romola’s own interpretative logic the Costanza
episode should be read as an escapist irruption into the novel’s narrative register, a flight from
history to romance. This accords with Susan M. Bernardo’s argument that Romola’s invocation
of Italian literature, as opposed to the favoured classicism of the patriarchy, marks a conscious
disjuncture in the narrative.

Romola seems almost to have swallowed up Romola, but here she floats off
into another story. [...] This is not simply a story within a story or case of
embedded narrative, rather it is totally separate from the fictional world the
novel presents to this point. 26

For Bernardo only the fact that ‘the Gostanza story that Romola remembers in this scene does
not exactly fit her own situation’ 27 reminds us of the distinction between Romola and Romola’s
narrator, between the romantic and the historical positions. However, though Gostanza may be
an inexact fit, the Constance-cycle as a whole is broader and more applicable, suggesting that
the medieval narrative persists subconsciously in the fictive Florence and consciously in the
nineteenth-century historical novel.

Notwithstanding Romola’s attempt to reinterpret herself as a medieval rather than a renaissance
(or nineteenth-century) heroine, her latent memory of the tale is associated with memories of
her father and the ‘historical’ Florence she is trying to escape. Her encounter with the tale is
prejudiced against a true reading because, as a literate Florentine reading Boccaccio, she
cannot adopt the medieval perspective that could have imagined that the tale was a true history.
It is a peculiar dilemma for a historian; it is precisely because of her training in reading
historical texts that Romola is debarred from appreciating the tale’s historical register. Chaucer
and Gower’s tales are embedded in a ‘history’ of the Christianization of Britain but Boccaccio’s
tale is a fable, an entertainment. Romola’s encounter with non-historical literature as a
distraction or sanctuary draws a sharp division between real and unreal; it makes no allowance
for the play of fact and fiction possible within literature. Such an approach would be
incompatible with Romola’s adoption of the Piagnoni’s strict separation of serious and
frivolous literature. At the Bonfire of the Vanities Romola justifies the burning of the works of
Petrarch and Boccaccio on the grounds that ‘men do not want books to make them think lightly
of vice, as if life were a vulgar joke’ (Romola, p. 429). It is particularly appropriate that Romola
should attempt to re-enact the narrative of a book that she had once sanctioned the destruction
of. Her involuntary recollection of a long-forgotten tale may represent a belated recognition of
the union of imaginary history and fable in medieval literature that anticipates Romola’s
troubled fusion of Renaissance history and romance.

Reading ‘Drifting Away’ and ‘Romola’s Waking’ alongside the four main Constance tales
demonstrates, if nothing else, the inadequacy of referring only to the Boccaccio variant in
criticism, given that the Constance-cycle is an intertextual artefact, the different tales closely
interwoven though subtly distinct. Whether or not a medieval reading is appropriate to a
Victorian historical novel, such an interpretation can at least contribute to the proliferation of
meaning in these strange chapters. Medieval narrative logic affords hermeneutic freedom to
these problematic chapters, which are problematic only if they are read outside of their
medieval context and made to conform to the strictures of the nineteenth-century historical
novel. These chapters are different from the rest of the text, but I would argue that this
difference signals not discontinuity but total immersion in the nebulous romantic ‘historical’
origin, and that in this total assimilation of an alien literary form the two chapters represent the
most complete achievement of Romola’s synthesis of literature and history.

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Notes

2 Westminster Review, 80 (1863), 344-52 (351).
5 Shona Elizabeth Simpson, ‘Mapping Romola: Physical Space, Women’s Place’, in From Author to Text, pp. 53-66 (p. 54).
6 Simpson, p. 64.
7 Julian Corner, “‘Telling the Whole”: Trauma, Drifting and Reconciliation in Romola’, in From Author to Text, pp. 67-88.
8 Margaret Schlauch, Chaucer’s Constance and Accused Queens (New York: New York University Press, 1927), pp. 3-11, 62-78.
9 J. R. Reinhard, ‘Setting Adrift in Medieval Law and Literature’, PMLA, 56 (1941), 33-68.
11 The Riverside Chaucer, ed. by Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 89-103. Subsequent references will be given within the text as ‘Man of Law’.
14 Westminster Review, 64 (1855), 299-300 (299).
15 Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer: With Poems Formerly Printed With His Or Attributed To Him, ed. by Robert Bell, 8 vols (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1855)
II, p. 9.


17 See *Confessio*, p. xv. Pauli argues that Chaucer’s ‘Man of Law’s Tale’ is indebted to Gower’s variant.

18 George Eliot, *Romola*, ed. by Leonée Ormond (London: Everyman Dent, 1999), p. 507. Subsequent references will be given within the text as *Romola*.

19 Bell, p. 10.


21 Kolve, p. 334.


24 David Carroll, ‘George Eliot Martyrologist: The Case of Savonarola’, in *From Author to Text*, pp. 105-121 (pp. 116-17). See also Andrew Thompson, *George Eliot and Italy: Literary, Cultural and Political Influences from Dante to the Risorgimento* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 94-96: Thompson identifies the plague-village with Dante’s purgatory, and so sees her ‘baptism’ as a renewed acceptance of the duties of purgatory. The boat is Charon’s boat, the ship of souls. George Eliot is employing more than one medieval register in this episode.

25 Kolve, p. 298.


27 Bernardo, p. 98.