The Forty-first George Eliot Memorial Lecture, 2012- Romola's Artists

Leonee Ormond

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, Literature in English, British Isles Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons


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.
THE FORTY-FIRST GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL LECTURE, 2012
Delivered by Leonée Ormond

ROMOLA'S ARTISTS


George Eliot had begun work on the novel in 1861, when she was forty-one. She had recently published Silas Marner, and The Mill on the Floss, preceded by Adam Bede, had come out not long before that. The genesis of Romola came in May 1860 when George Eliot and George Henry Lewes spent two weeks in Florence. Lewes noted that, ‘while reading about Savonarola it occurred to me that his life and times afford fine material for an historical romance’. The idea appealed to George Eliot and they began on some preliminary research. The writing of Silas Marner intervened, but the couple were back in Florence a year later and stayed in the city for a month.

In deciding to write a novel about Florence in the late fifteenth century, just after the death of Lorenzo de Medici, and in the time of Fra Girolamo Savonarola, a novelist as conscientious and thorough as George Eliot felt obliged to do her homework. She and Lewes spent much of their time in Florence in galleries, palaces, churches and libraries, and we can gather some idea of their activities from letters and diaries. Like many historical novelists, she chose to write about an era of transition, from the Middle Ages to the full-blown Renaissance, rich in works of art.

Like many Victorians, George Eliot believed that the Papacy had become corrupt in the second half of the fifteenth century. The Popes of the period were worldly princes from prominent families with little religious zeal. The Pope who battled with Savonarola was Rodrigo Borgia who took the title of Alexander VI. Savonarola himself was a visionary, espousing the path of religious purity, and urging the Florentines to examine the state of their own souls. Although a devout Christian and a priest, his position led him into conflict with the great Florentine families and with the Papacy who regarded him as a dangerous revolutionary. He was doctrinaire and authoritarian in his puritanical denial of humanism and the arts. Florence had been in the forefront of Renaissance thought and culture and remained an enlightened city.

Romola is the daughter of a disillusioned scholar, Bardo Bardi, and the wife of a classical scholar, the perfidious Greek-born Tito Melema. One of George Eliot’s aims in writing her novel was to create a convincing historical setting for her readers, something very different from the Midland background of her first novel, Adam Bede. Both books present an environment which helps to define personality. If some readers have found her detailed descriptions daunting, they serve to set the novel securely in its political, religious and cultural setting.

Luckily for us, much of what George Eliot saw in Florence is still there. We can both follow in her footsteps and establish which are the ‘real’ works of art she referenced in the novel, as opposed to those invented to suit her fiction. She consulted works of art and histories of costume in order to capture the fashion and appearance of Florentines at this date. She asked her illustrator, Frederic Leighton, to check the detail in Domenico Ghirlandaio’s frescoes in the
church of Santa Maria Novella: ‘I wish’, she wrote to Leighton, ‘you would especially notice if the women in his groups have not that plain piece of opaque drapery over the head which haunts my memory’.² Ghirlandaio’s fresco of ‘The Birth of Mary’ is set in a Florentine palace, with groups of noblemen and women visiting each other. They are, as George Eliot realized, a wonderful guide to the dress and interior decoration of her chosen era.

George Eliot was thrilled to have Leighton as an illustrator. As a young man of twenty-four, trained in Germany and in Italy, he had made his name in England with the exhibition of his Cimabue’s Madonna carried in triumph through the streets of Florence at the Royal Academy of 1855. It was bought there by Queen Victoria on the advice of Prince Albert. A painter known for his historical recreations of the Florentine art world, Leighton was the perfect choice for Romola. He became a good friend of Eliot with whom he corresponded on the subject matter of his illustrations.

George Eliot’s research was carried out in libraries as well as on site in Florence. As a young woman, George Eliot was unable to afford the subscription for a private library, but the success of her early novels gave her the resources to do so. Some of the books which she read on her return from Florence are still on the shelves of the London Library.³

The most important artist introduced in Romola is Piero di Cosimo. He first appears in chapter three when Tito Melema, having survived a shipwreck, has gone into the shop of the barber, Nello, with Bratti the pedlar. There are crowds in the streets and the squares following the death of Lorenzo de Medici. Nello shows Tito a sketch by Piero, telling him that it is by ‘a strange freakish painter, who says he saw it by long looking at a mouldy wall’.⁴ The sketch Nello points to represents three masks:

one a drunken laughing Satyr, another a sorrowing Magdalen, and the third, which lay between them, the rigid, cold face of a Stoic: the masks rested obliquely on the lap of a little child, whose cherub features rose above them with something of the supernal promise in the gaze which painters had by that time learned to give to the Divine Infant.

‘A symbolical picture, I see,’ said the young Greek. (33)

Nello proceeds to tell Tito that Piero’s response to questions about the meaning of the sketch is to say that his pictures are an appendix to God’s creation of the world, and that, if they seek enlightenment, they should ask the Church. Requested to paint a picture from the sketch, Piero refused, saying that the fancy was past.

Piero himself comes into the barber’s shop in the next chapter: ‘a tall figure, about fifty, with a short trimmed beard, wearing an old felt hat and a threadbare mantle’ (41-2). He looks hard at Tito, and proposes to paint him as Sinon deceiving Priam in the Iliad. Tito is shocked at the suggestion, and Nello quickly launches an attack on Piero, telling him that Tito would make a good model for St Sebastian or Bacchus and Phoebus Apollo, but not for a traitor. George Eliot is here setting the scene for Tito’s later acts of treachery. He refuses to rescue his adopted father from kidnappers, and later on he betrays others, including his wife, Romola, when he takes a mistress and when he sells his father-in-law’s library without her permission. He is responsible for the execution of Romola’s godfather, Bernardo del Nero, and twice betrays Savonarola. The second plot is successful and, as a result, Savonarola is also executed. George Eliot’s point here is that the true artist, even one as unconventional as Piero, has an insight which others lack. Piero tells Nello that, in order to paint a traitor, he needs a sitter on whose face
vice can write no marks […] lips that will lie with a dimpled smile – eyes of such agate like brightness and depth that no infamy can dull them – cheeks that will rise from a murder and not look haggard. I say not this young man is a traitor: I mean he has a face that would make him the more perfect traitor if he had the heart of one. (42)

When Piero sees Tito with his adoptive father, Baldassare, whom he has refused to help, he makes another sketch of Tito’s expression. This painting plays a part in the novel, for, when Romola sees it, she recognizes the old man, and tries to work out the truth. Is he really a madman who has accosted Tito in the street? Piero, who meets Baldassare, wants to paint him and then kindly directs him to a hospital.

Why did George Eliot choose an artist who was little known or admired at the time to play such a major role in Romola? Hugh Witemeyer, in his George Eliot and the Visual Arts, suggests that the choice was made for exactly that reason, as the novelist had a wide latitude to do what she wished with the character. Her main source for Piero’s life was Giorgio Vasari’s Lives of the Painters, a biographical study of Renaissance artists originally published in 1550. A selection was first translated into English in the seventeenth century and Mrs Jonathan Foster’s more comprehensive translation came out in 1850. We learn from George Eliot’s diary that Lewes bought her a copy of Vasari on 7 October 1861. Vasari paints a picture of Piero as an eccentric man, hiding in his filthy home, refusing to mix with others, eating extraordinary things and profoundly irritated by loud noises such as crying babies or ringing bells.

George Eliot did not take over Vasari’s portrait of the artist wholesale, as she shows Piero in company with others rather than as a loner. She does however demonstrate his obstinacy and distaste for the midsummer procession in chapter eight. She would have known Vasari’s account of Piero’s youthful involvement in similar events, as a designer of costumes and floats. Her account of a grotesque procession representing Time, in chapter twenty, draws on a masque devised by Piero several years after the events described in the novel. She gives her own version of Vasari’s statement that Piero ‘drew most excellently from life’, when her character sketches Tito and Baldassare so brilliantly. She may have had in mind for this the portrait of a beautiful young man by Piero in the Picture Gallery at Dulwich.

As far as we know, the subjects of most of the works by Piero mentioned in the text are invented. The sketch in Nello’s barber’s shop, and the study of a man in a state of shock, are there to underscore the narrative. No painting by Piero of Bacchus and Ariadne, the subject of the triptych which Tito gives to his wife, Romola, is recorded. This picture has a bearing on a number of issues in the novel. The triptych, with its pagan subject, is intended to hold the crucifix given to Romola by her dying brother, Dino. Tito locks the cross inside the triptych case in order to cut her off from the influence of Dino’s memory. Only when finally disillusioned with her husband does Romola find the key, open it, remove the crucifix and leave the triptych behind. Part of the payment for the triptych comes from the sale by Tito of Baldassare’s ring, a symbol of his abandonment of the man who had raised him from childhood.

Bacchus and Ariadne also has a bearing on Tito’s relationship to Romola. Bacchus rescues Ariadne after Theseus has left her alone on the island of Naxos, as Tito rescues Romola from her solitary life with her father. In his later treatment of Romola, however, Tito becomes not the rescuing Bacchus but the betraying Theseus. The mythic tale is then replayed with Romola once again representing the unhappy Ariadne. She is not the only woman whom Tito betrays; the young Florentine, Tessa, believes that he is her husband and has two children by
him. Of less importance, but again relevant, is the fact that Piero paints Romola’s blind father as another blind man, Oedipus, whose devoted daughter, for whom Romola is the model, is Antigone.

George Eliot would have seen Piero’s Venus, Mars and Cupid in the Kaiser-Friedrich Museum during her time in Berlin in 1854, and she mentions this as the one ‘real’ work in Piero’s studio. It is also a painting described by Vasari in his life of the artist.

George Eliot suggested that Leighton might copy a portrait of Piero for his illustrations. She found the engraved portrait of the artist in her copy of Vasari unsatisfactory and hoped that Leighton would locate Piero among the artists whose self-portraits hang in the Uffizi in Florence. In this she was disappointed. The novelist told Leighton that it seemed unlikely that there would be a portrait of the ironsmith Niccolo Caparra: ‘so that you may feel easy in letting your imagination interpret my suggestions’? She reiterated her suggestion that he look carefully at the frescoes of Ghirlandaio. In the novel, the narrator tells us that Caparra had ‘often been an unconscious model to Domenico Ghirlandajo, when that great painter was making the walls of the churches reflect the life of Florence, and translating pale aerial traditions into the deep colour and strong lines of the faces he knew’ (19).

George Eliot scatters references to painters and sculptors through the earlier part of her text, but it is noticeable that, when the action of the novel becomes more intense towards the conclusion, she is less anxious about building up a context and references to painting become less frequent. In chapter twenty, for example, she notes, very much in passing, that there is, in Romola and Tito’s home, a sculpture of a ‘young faun playing the flute, modelled by a promising youth named Michelangelo Buonarotti’ (201). No such statue by Michaelangelo is known, but, if George Eliot read Ascanio Condivi’s life of the sculptor, which seems likely, she would have known that Michaelangelo first caught Lorenzo de Medici’s attention with the head of a faun.

When Nello the barber and Piero di Cosimo are arguing about Tito’s suitability as a model for the traitor, Nello tells him: ‘I shall never look at such an outside as that without taking it as a sign of a loveable nature. Why, thou wilt say next that Lionardo, whom thou art always raving about, ought to have made his Judas as beautiful as St John!’ (44). He is presumably thinking of the representation of St John and Judas in Leonardo’s The Last Supper in Milan. When Piero declares that he declines to watch the midsummer procession, Nello tells him that his ‘favourite’ Leonardo would have made grotesque sketches of the country folk as they came past (88). Writing about the cherubs which are to be seen on the floats passing by in the procession, George Eliot notes: ‘even as they may be seen to this day in the pictures of Perugino’ (82).

These are only some of the references to particular painters of the period, not specific, but intended to evoke the spirit of the age. Among the minor painters who appear briefly as characters are Mariotto Albertinelli and Lorenzo di Credi. As George Eliot told Leighton, she liked, where possible, to draw upon portraits of her real life characters for her own account of them. When she mentions Bernardo Dovizi of Bibbiena, an advisor to Giovanni de Medici, she is able to tell us that he ‘now looks at us out of Raphael’s portrait as the keen-eyed Cardinal da Bibbiena’ (196).

For Niccolo Macchiavelli, a colleague of Tito’s who appears in the novel from time to time, George Eliot seems to be drawing upon the striking portrait of him by Tito di Santi, which hangs in the Palazzo Vecchio of Florence:
Fra Bartolommeo: Savonarola (San Marco, Florence).

Fra Angelico: The Crucifixion (San Marco, Florence).
He was a young man about Tito’s own age, with keen features, small close-clipped head, and close-shaven lip and chin, giving the idea of a mind as little encumbered as possible with material that was not nervous. (166)

A more important character is Savonarola. Here, George Eliot’s description of him, as first seen by Romola at her brother’s death-bed in chapter fifteen, is clearly taken from a portrait by Fra Bartolommeo, a version of which is now in the convent of San Marco. Originally named Baccio della Porta, the artist only joined the Dominican order after Savonarola’s death:

They were very marked features, such as lend themselves to popular description. There was the high arched nose, the prominent under-lip, the coronet of thick dark hair above the brow, all seeming to tell of energy and passion; there were the blue-grey eyes, shining mildly under auburn eyelashes, seeming, like the hands, to tell of acute sensitiveness. (160)

In George Eliot’s lifetime women were not allowed above the ground floor of the convent of San Marco, preventing her from seeing Savonarola’s cell and the frescoes by Fra Angelico on the first floor. In the novel, Romola is in the same position. Drawing on Lewes’s account the novelist set several scenes in Romola there, among them the description in chapter sixty-four of Tito visiting the upper corridor in order to speak with Savonarola.

Fra Angelico’s frescoes, delicate as the rainbow on the melting cloud, startled the unaccustomed eye here and there, as if they had been sudden reflections cast from an ethereal world, where the Madonna sat crowned in her radiant glory, and the divine Infant looked forth with perpetual promise. (529)

Fortunately, George Eliot was able to see one of Fra Angelico’s finest works, painted on the wall of the ground floor chapter house. This is the Crucifixion and it is part of the setting for two of the novel’s most telling confrontations, the first at the deathbed of Romola’s brother and the other when Romola comes to the convent in order to intercede for her godfather, Bernardo del Nero. In the deathbed scene, George Eliot refers briefly to the mural: ‘in the background there was a crucified form rising high and pale on the frescoed wall, and pale faces of sorrow looking out from it below’ (155). George Eliot’s private thoughts on the painting, where she writes of ‘the inimitable group of the fainting mother, upheld by St John and the younger Mary, and clasped round by the kneeling Magdalene’, help to establish a parallel between two grieving women, Romola and the Virgin Mary. Not surprisingly, Leighton included a detail of Fra Angelico’s work in his illustration of this scene. As Romola pleads with Savonarola for her godfather’s life, the fresco sets up another parallel, that of public execution. Savonarola, like Pontius Pilate, refuses to follow his own judgement and spare the victim from death.

The Victorians took the gentle, spiritual paintings of Fra Angelico to their hearts. The National Gallery in London bought five panels from the altarpiece of San Domenico in Florence shortly before the publication of Romola. On her visit in 1860, George Eliot declared that, of all the frescoes in Florence, she most admired those by Fra Angelico which she was able to see at San Marco, and also expressed her enthusiasm for a Pietà by the artist in the Accademia Gallery. Lewes commissioned an artist, whose name, amusingly, was Buonarrotti, to copy one of Fra Angelico’s San Marco frescoes (probably the Crucifixion) for George Eliot who ‘wished to hang it before her as she writes’. In his account of the upper floor of San Marco, Lewes also told George Eliot of a
‘much defaced’ *Madonna and Child* by Fra Bartolommeo which hung in Savonarola’s cell: ‘the child more lifelike and noble than any but Raphael’s Sistine children’. Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna* had moved and captivated George Eliot and Lewes while they were in Dresden in 1858 so that the comparison is a powerful one. In the novel, George Eliot refers to the Fra Bartolommeo painting, describing the artist as ‘that young painter who had lately surpassed himself in his fresco of the Divine child on the wall of the Frate’s bare cell’ (236). In fact, the painting by Fra Bartolommeo which Lewes saw did not hang in the cell at San Marco’s in Savonarola’s lifetime, but was moved there later from the Hospice of Santa Maria Maddalena in Pian di Mugnone. George Eliot did occasionally fall into anachronisms of this kind. Another example is to be found in chapter fifty-two when she refers to the Filippino Lippi altarpiece in the Church of the Badia, showing the Virgin appearing to St Bernard, a painting which did not hang there until twenty years after the date of the novel.

We may be surprised that George Eliot fails to mention Sandro Botticelli, a follower of Savonarola. At the time when she was writing *Romola*, however, Botticelli was little-known and Murray’s guidebooks do not mention paintings which now entrance visitors to the Uffizi gallery. Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Walter Pater were among the aesthetes who propelled Botticelli into the limelight as one of the great masters of fifteenth century art.

The National Gallery may have given George Eliot one source for her account of a painting of St Michael the Archangel in the Church of the Annunziata in Florence, where Tessa, gazing at the altarpiece, compares the image to that of the handsome Tito. Tito has already been compared to St Michael by Bratti the pedlar, an ironic comparison for a character who is the reverse of saintly. In fact, there was no painting of St Michael in the Annunziata. As Andrew Brown has suggested, it seems likely that George Eliot was thinking of Perugino’s representation of St Michael in his painting of *The Assumption of the Virgin*, then hanging in the Gallery of the Accademia in Florence (634-5). This image of the saint is very close to that in a Perugino polyptych bought by the National Gallery in 1856.

There have been suggestions that George Eliot was influenced by the American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne in her use of works of art as a form of commentary on fictional themes and characters. In *The Marble Faun*, published in 1860, Hawthorne also introduces a painting of St Michael, although by a very different artist, the seventeenth century Bolognese painter, Guido Reni. Hawthorne places his characters in front of the altarpiece in the church of Santa Maria della Concezione in Rome and uses it as a device to illustrate the differing responses of his characters. The Bolognese school, highly regarded in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was falling from favour by the date of the publication of *Romola*, in part under the influence of Ruskin. George Eliot particularly disliked Guido’s representations of the crucified Christ in the Dresden gallery. With this in mind, any parallel with Hawthorne should probably be restricted to the subject matter, the representation of the battle against evil (ironic in George Eliot’s case) as St Michael overcomes the devil.

George Eliot’s descriptions of Tessa gazing at the painting of St Michael, and of Romola set against Fra Angelico’s representation of the crucifixion, provide a historical and symbolic context for the novel. Even without a reproduction, the novelist tells us enough about the subject and the setting of works of art to clarify their significance. Her wish to see portraits of ‘real’ characters is another indication of her determination to come as close as she can to the true spirit of the time. It is one of the strengths of *Romola* that the novelist conveys so well the role of Florence as a city of art, both in the fifteenth century and, by implication, in her own
day and in ours.

Notes


2 *Letters*: IV, 73.


7 *Letters*: IV, 55.

