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CONFERENCE REPORT

Romola and *Felix Holt*, Institute of English Studies, 23 November 2013.

By A. G. van den Broek

George Eliot's two Marmite novels – given their reputations, not everyone tries them, and when they do, they often leave them only partially digested – *Romola* (1862-3), the one she famously said aged her, and *Felix Holt* (1866), the one with that involved legal plot, were the focus of last year's George Eliot Conference sponsored by the Institute of English Studies at the University of London. Nevertheless, despite their uneven appeal, the Conference drew a tolerably-sized audience. Barbara Hardy (Birkbeck and Swansea) and Louise Lee (Roehampton) once again organized the Conference, bringing together a group of speakers who variously dealt with the topics of art, politics, religion and laughter.

Leonee Ormond (King's College London) gave the first of two longer papers, 'The Illustrations of *Romola*' – by Frederick Leighton (1830-1896). He was only 32 when commissioned by Eliot, having come to prominence during the 1855 exhibition of his painting 'Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna is carried in Procession through the Streets of Florence', which Prince Albert urged Queen Victoria to buy. In a fascinating talk that helped the audience to visualize a number of Florentine references, Ormond recalled Eliot's great delight in having Leighton as her illustrator. Besides her own long, painstaking research into all things fifteenth-century Florence, she called on him to confirm, among other things, details of dress and decorations in the frescos of the church of Santa Maria Novella. He was, therefore, instrumental in the way her characters are described, although he sometimes ignored the detail Eliot wanted. With the help of slides and handouts, Ormond also considered some of the artists who are either mentioned in *Romola* or appear as characters. A notable omission, Ormond reminded us, is Sandro Botticelli (c.1445-1510), which may seem odd, given his great popularity today. However, Ormond pointed out, Botticelli's fame post-dates *Romola*.

In the second longer, thought provoking paper, 'Romola and Politics', Andrew Sanders (Durham) argued that despite being steeped in Roman Catholicism, as practised in late fifteenth-century Florence, *Romola* makes important observations relevant to the political climate of Victorian England. Writing an historical novel, Sanders explained, meant Eliot had an opportunity to make daring statements about contemporary issues she would not have been able to make had the novel been set in her own time and place. For instance, her focus on what Sanders called Florence's 'awkward squad', those Mediceans, followers of Savonarola and others, who wittingly or unwittingly, through competence or incompetence, resist or obstruct changes to Florence governance, serve to disguise Eliot's critique of England's own turbulent political machinations around the time of *Romola*'s publication. By dwelling on the behaviour of a foreign, mediaeval Roman Catholic Church, Sanders said, Eliot could rely on her contemporary readers not taking umbrage at her radical observations, including ones to do with sexual politics. To illustrate the latter point, Sanders recalled that part of the novel where *Romola* drifts in a boat, arrives in a valley, carries a child, and is mistaken for the Virgin Mary. Eliot carefully deconstructs that religious impression, Sanders argued, by emphasizing *Romola*'s practical approach to assisting the poor and needy. She finds milk to feed the child, buries the dead and nurses the sick. When she leaves, she is no longer seen as the Holy Madonna but the 'Lady'. She then searches for and looks after Tessa and her children in what

Sanders described as a sort of feminists' commune. Eliot could never have suggested such an ending for a nineteenth-century heroine, because such an independent life for women would have been considered impossible. Thus, in a novel depicting a narrow, heavily regimented society, Sanders argued, Eliot manages to offer new, exciting, radical ways in which people may move forward and change.

John Burton, our Chairman, then spoke briefly about the Fellowship's aims, objectives, its many activities throughout the year, and gave a potted history of recent events surrounding the original farm buildings behind Griff House, which Eliot would have known when she lived there. Recently, these now dilapidated structures were in imminent danger of demolition – until the Fellowship stepped in and happily persuaded the owners to invest in their restoration. He concluded by warmly inviting anyone not already a member to join the Fellowship.

After lunch, there were four shorter papers, the first by Isobel Armstrong (Birkbeck) called '*Felix Holt* and Halting Politics'. Armstrong argued that for all her remarkable insights into people's natures and experiences, Eliot's awareness of working men and their needs were far from impressive. More often than not, the novel depicts them as unstable, gullible, simpletons in need of hectoring lectures. Eliot's finger-wagging essay, 'Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt' (1868), especially illustrates the point, according to Armstrong. By contrast, Sir Maximus Debarry, the magistrates and other country gentlemen are effortlessly drawn as the patrician elite sympathetic towards the errant Felix, for example, when they can afford to be, or the abused Harold Transome when they need to be because he is one of their own. It is this disparity in the representation of classes that accounts for the novel's halting politics.

Ruth Livesey (Royal Holloway) further examined Eliot's approach to politics in her paper 'Radicalism on the Cross-Roads: *Felix Holt* & William Cobbett'.¹ Livesey argued that Cobbett (1763-1835) offers a useful foil to understanding Eliot's particular brand of radicalism. Both writers depict early nineteenth-century English folk living on or near the turnpikes that connect market towns. But whereas Cobbett's writing was aimed at encouraging what he hoped would become a networked opposition to parliamentary corruption, which he saw as having destroyed people's historic popular rights, *Felix Holt* urges a conservative radicalism informed by what Livesey described 'inward revolution, local attachment and individual memory'. This very detailed and interesting paper sparked a discussion afterwards with many agreeing that readers 'see' a good deal of Loamshire's geography, especially its roads and cross-roads, unlike, say, in *Middlemarch* where the spotlight is more on what takes place in houses or clusters of houses.

Alain Jumeau (Paris-Sorbonne) was unable to attend the Conference to give his paper, 'Religion in *Romola*': it was, therefore, delivered by Barbara Hardy. The paper described *Romola*'s 'spiritual odyssey' (Felicia Bonaparte's phrase quoted by Jumeau) from pagan philosophy to Christianity and eventually a version of the Religion of Humanity theorized by August Comte (1798-1857). If *Romola*'s religious evolution, as it were, does not accord fully with Comte's law of three stages – the theological, metaphysical and positive – what cannot be disputed, according to Jumeau, is Comte's influence on Eliot's writing, especially where *Romola* is concerned.

The last paper of the day was Louise Lee's 'Laughter Versus Sympathy in *Romola* and *Felix Holt*'. It explored the nature of, and causes for, laughter; what may be said about the shifting social values of people and their cultures, given the sorts of things they laugh

about. In particular, Lee explored Eliot's deep concern over the way laughter usually predicated ridicule and scorn rather than sympathy and fellow-feeling. In the interest of authenticating what passed for humour in fifteenth-century Florence, or when depicting the true nature of, say, Mrs Transome in *Felix Holt*, Eliot would include what she otherwise considered coarse, vulgar, insensitive. But what she wanted and strove for was 'sympathetic amusement'. In another very interesting paper that opened up new ways of thinking about Eliot's fiction, Lee considered the extent to which Eliot succeeded in doing that in *Romola* and, perhaps to a lesser extent, in *Felix Holt*.

There then followed a screening of *Romola*, the 1924 silent film, starring Lillian Gish, Dorothy Gish, Ronald Colman and William Powell. Directed by Henry King, the two-hour-long film was shot in Florence, used lavish props, and pioneered panchromatic stock, a recently-developed and sensitive type of negative, all of which contributed to the film's impressive visual quality. As a piece of early twentieth-century cinema, it is certainly interesting to watch. The brainchild of Lillian Gish, it broadly follows events in the novel, but it is also one of the first, if not *the* first, film adaptation seeking to 'improve' on a book. The film's *Romola* does not end up looking after Tessa and her children: she marries Carlo, a sculptor who always loved her, apparently.

No toast and Marmite at the end of the Conference, perhaps, but there was some very good, much appreciated, wine. For that and the considerable time and organization, which goes into bringing together fine, stimulating papers, the two organizers, Barbara Hardy and Louise Lee, fully deserved the thanks they received from the delegates.

Note

- 1 This was a shortened version of a chapter, 'Radicalism on the Cross Roads: William Cobbett, George Eliot, *Felix Holt*', in *Essays in Memory of Sally Ledger*, ed. Joseph Bristow, and Josephine McDonagh (Palgrave, 2014).