

## The religious aesthetic in George Eliot's *Romola*

Throughout *Romola* (1862-3), George Eliot represents Renaissance Florence in visual terms. She draws attention to the cathedral's façade and the frescoes and paintings in the convent and churches and highlights the how religious aesthetics work to interrupt quotidian Florentine life. In this paper, I suggest that while these interruptions exemplify character traits, they also illuminate Eliot's hermeneutical and philosophical questions about the interrelationship between the sacred and the profane.

As he approaches Savonarola's cell when he visits San Marco on a treacherous errand, Tito Melema passes through corridors decorated by Fra Angelico's frescoes: 'delicate as the rainbow on the melting cloud, [they] startled the unaccustomed eye here and there, as if they had been sudden reflections cast from an ethereal world' (491). The startling presence of the frescoes highlights Tito's distance from the sacred and from his estranged wife Romola who, bringing healing to a plague-stricken village, palpably connects the 'ethereal world' of the religious aesthetic with what Augustus Comte had described as the 'Religion of Humanity'.<sup>1</sup>

From his arrival in Florence at the start of the novel, Tito stands as a judge and critic of the 'prophetic' symbolism of Florence while simultaneously being appropriated into religious art as angel and saint (31). When he surprises his child-like mistress Tessa by his presence in the church, her meditation on the religious iconography is not broken: 'She turned her head and saw Tito's face close to her: it was very much more beautiful than the Archangel Michael's, who was so mighty and so good that he lived with the Madonna and all the saints and was prayed to along with them' (141). Tessa's subsequent prayers to Tito - and later to Romola, who she also 'confusedly associated with the pictures in the churches' (436) - exemplifies her confusion between the sacred and profane as well as her apprehension of the immediacy of the eternal.

Romola's religious journey enables her to reconcile the sacred and profane for herself and for Tessa. Responding to Savonarola's fierce insistence that the 'cause of [his] party is the cause of God's Kingdom', she declares, 'God's Kingdom is something wider- else let me stand outside it with the beings I love' (464). At the end of the novel, she enables a broader vision of God's Kingdom when she dedicates a shrine to Savonarola. It is through love that she chooses to honour as a saint the man who, with all of his faults, aided her when she was 'in great need' (548). Moreover, that the 'small full-length portrait' of the Dominican Brother becomes an icon that inspires noble action, rather than an idol or idealised representation, testifies to her commitment to the power of the religious aesthetic to interrupt and transform the domestic space (545).

Work Cited:

Eliot, George. *Romola*. Oxford UP, 1998.

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<sup>1</sup> To discuss the influence of Comte's philosophy, I will draw on Felicia Bonaparte. *The Triptych and the Cross: The Central Myths of George Eliot's Poetic Imagination*. Harvester Press, 1979.