George Eliot’s *Romola*: A Victorian Perspective on Renaissance Florence

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Most of George Eliot’s novels were set in nineteenth-century England, but her vivid historical novel *Romola* – which places a well-educated female protagonist in Renaissance Florence – was an exception to this rule. *Romola* presents something of a mystery: Eliot says that she gave her “best blood” in this endeavor, though the novel has sometimes been criticized for the extent of its visual and historical detail. But why did Eliot choose to write such an unusual novel? What was she trying to accomplish in this ambitious work, and how did this large-scale experiment affect her subsequent writing?

In this project I will argue that the very features that make *Romola* so unusual furthered Eliot’s development as a novelist. Her extremely detailed focus on the cultural and geographic environment of this novel set the stage for Eliot’s groundbreaking attention to the intense interaction between character and setting, a hallmark of her later, most ambitious and successful masterpiece, *Middlemarch*. The great attention to travel and movement in *Romola* highlights the constraints placed by the environment on Eliot’s female characters. And by placing her female protagonist in Renaissance Florence, Eliot chooses a time of burgeoning individual rights and intellectual creativity – but not for women. In bringing these limitations to light, Eliot makes a feminist statement about the restricted rights of women, and reaches beyond that feminist lens to show us the human condition, one in which autonomous action can only carry us so far. It will be the argument of my thesis that in *Romola*, Eliot situates her characters in what I will call a *tethered* environment, in which the person is tightly laced to society and culture. I will further argue that this close interaction between character and setting grew in part out of the Darwinian scientific culture in which Eliot participated, and that it became a platform for her later great work of *Middlemarch*. In both *Romola* and even more in *Middlemarch*, Eliot thus creates a new complex structure for the novel, one that carries the model of the *Bildungsroman* into territory that presages the modern dilemma of perceived limitations on human endeavors.

In undertaking this work, I have tried to follow in Eliot’s footsteps in two ways: through her original research documents for *Romola* (now held at the British Library in London, the Weston Library of the Bodleian Library at Oxford University, and the Firestone Library at Princeton University), through examination of Frederic Leighton’s drawings for the book (the originals of which are now at the Houghton Library at Harvard University), and through my own travel to Florence to see the places that Eliot used in constructing this book. This background work is inevitably of my own time and place, not Eliot’s (to say nothing of that of the Renaissance), but perhaps the distance involved will add a perspective on what George Eliot was attempting in her commitment to this work.