

# Romance as Gendered History: George Eliot's Feminist Discourse in *Romola*

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## **Abstract**

Gender is a problem that has to be discussed for the British author George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans). It may seem strange to examine Eliot's work in terms of romance instead of realism, because she defines romance as a silly female desire for uncultured knowledge, as she tells us in her essay, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists." However, this paper will argue that romance involves not simply a reflection but a rethinking of gender for Eliot. As Diane Elam, in *Romancing the Postmodern*, writes, romance has become "the woman of the world of genres (...) helpmate of serious historical inquiry" nevertheless, romance should not be understood as built upon the foundations of an assumed gendering. Joan Wallach Scott, in *Gender and the Politics of History*, has already stated that women's history does not have a definable historiographic tradition within which "interpretations can be debated and revised (...) instead, the subject of woman has been either grafted on to other traditions or studied in isolation from them." In this essay, while rereading *Romola* (1863)--set in late-15<sup>th</sup>-century Florence-- which is Eliot's thoroughly researched reconstruction of a past period, I will try to bring together feminist analysis of the genre, culture and history. My central argument is that Eliot displaces received meanings by rereading history through the agency of gender through romance which offers a way of revaluing the complex and contradictory aspects of female discourse.

## **Keywords**

George Eliot, *Romola*, romance, feminist discourse, historiography, Victorian novel

In the second half of the twentieth century, the arguments that History was devoid of women subjects and practitioners and that studies of history as a profession often followed male-defined procedures and topics, inevitably required a version of historical reality which acknowledged 'gender' as a category of analysis. It was in the 1970s and 1980s that the term 'her-story' which aimed at constructing female-centered accounts of the past, was coined which presented history as a compensatory feminist practice. Joan Wallach Scott, the writer of *Gender and the Politics of History*, drawing attention to how 'her-story' challenges received interpretations of historical progress and regress, asks: "can a focus on women add a supplement to history without rewriting it? Beyond that, what does the feminist rewriting of history entail?" (1988, 17). She points out that a change in perspective required new interpretations:

An impressive mass of evidence has been compiled to show that the Renaissance was not a renaissance for women, that technology did not lead to women's liberation either in the workplace or at home, that the Age of Democratic Revolutions excluded women from political participation, that the affective nuclear family constrained women's emotional and personal development, and that the rise of medical science deprived women of autonomy and sense of feminine community (Scott 1988, 19).

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, 'her-story approach' had important effects on historical scholarship by demonstrating that gender which needs to be conceptualized in historical terms. Briefly, 'her-story approach' establishes the legitimacy of narratives about women and treats them as historical subjects. It also emphasizes the importance of gender difference in the organization of social life. The vital question that emerges at this point concerns the contribution of women writers to feminist historiography before the twentieth century. Lionel Gossman, the contemporary American historian, claims that "as late as the eighteenth century, and probably beyond, history was still a literary genre" (1990, 3). In the nineteenth century, historiography was considered to be the greater scholarly, scientific, stylistic profession depending on documentation. Nevertheless, as Devony Looser, in her book *British Women Writers and the Writing of History*, points out, "countless female-authored essays, secret histories, conduct books, biographies, memoirs, travel narratives, historical translations, fictional narratives, and poems, responded to, participated in, and contributed to the development of history writing" during the long eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries (2000, 22). It was in the nineteenth century when romance gained popularity to revive the historical past, especially through the novels of Sir Walter Scott. Romances had already been popular throughout centuries with their feminine associations, fanciful stories, chivalrous heroes, and historically remote locations. On the other hand, historical romances were different: they were formulated by blending a fictional romantic plot with a setting constituted by factual historical detail of a specific historical time.

In the nineteenth century, Mary Ann Evans, who is known with the penname George Eliot, published *Romola* with its account of the Renaissance at the time of the Dominican preacher Savonarola and Machiavelli. The novel is clearly a reconsideration of history in the form of historical romance. It is George Eliot's mid-career work and her "first attempt

to set a novel somewhere other than the English Midlands of her youth” (Malachuk 2008, 42). As her publisher wrote to Eliot: “Savonarola and his times is a splendid subject for you, and you have such a power of importing reality to every thing you write that your Romance will not read like Fiction. I expect that you will return Historical Romance to its ancient popularity” (Haight 1978, 340). The idea of writing romance firstly paralyzed Eliot, because she believed that historical romance should follow accurate knowledge of the past. Moreover, she stated her belief that one can never know enough about the past to write romance. Besides, as it is mentioned in her letters, romance stereotypes the characterless passive female and the masterful hero for Eliot. In 1860, on her first trip to Italy, Eliot’s longstanding wish to write an ‘Italian story’ had taken shape as a work between the historical novel and the liberty of romance. Gradually, she included excessive historical detail and started writing the fictional biography of ‘a great woman’, *Romola*, to revise history.

In the process of writing *Romola*, her decision to set the action in Florentine Renaissance forced her to do research in the Florentine archives. With the assistance of George Henry Lewes, Eliot researched the period for more than a year before she started writing. She made intense study of English, Italian, Latin, French, and German sources. Eliot would report later that “I began it a young woman – I finished it an old woman” (quoted in Harris 2000, 340). Clearly, Eliot had the intention to write the Renaissance period as analogous with the nineteenth century England. She saw moral emotions, rather than specific events and conditions, as the true history of Italy and the same emotions might be at work in the history of England. *Romola* begins with the death of “Lorenzo the Magnificent” in 1492 and ends with the execution of “the radical republican” and Dominican priest, Savonarola, in 1498. As Daniel S. Malachuk puts it, Savonarola demands for civic renewal through absolute virtue, and this was considered as “a threat to the newly formed republican legislature as well as to the church” (2008, 41). In this political turmoil in Florence, some supporters of Medici family and Savonarola were sentenced to death. *Romola* is an intelligent and well-educated woman who has been raised as a pagan, and who has no guides other than her essentially religious sense of duty. Moreover, she has intellectual and moral integrity and strong principles. She marries Tito -a student of classical literature, though he is not the ideal mate for her. After learning that Tito has betrayed Bardo -Romola’s father- by selling his library, she determines to leave her husband and go to Venice to support herself by scholarship. Persuaded by Savonarola to return to Florence, she lives in the same house with Tito until she learns that he has plotted against Savonarola and betrayed her godfather. In the course of the novel she loses, or is freed from, her brother Dino; her father, Bardo; her godfather, Bernardo; her husband, Tito; and her spiritual father Savonarola. She finds that she cannot be at once a faithful daughter, an obedient wife, a Christian as defined by the Church, and a citizen loyal to the State. She has to set herself free of relatives, a husband or a mentor in her quest for selfhood.

In the last chapter, *Romola* gets a boat “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” (Eliot 1946, 321). The

boat “instead of bringing her to death, (...) had been the gently lulling cradle of a new life” (Eliot 1946, 354). She drifts to a plague-stricken village where she helps others. Back in Florence, upon learning that Tito has been murdered by his foster father, she seeks out Tessa (Tito’s mistress) and her children, because she has promised to take care of them. Romola becomes the “matriarch” and lives with her cousin Brigida, Tessa and her two children. Later, she tells her adopted son that the highest happiness comes from “having wide thoughts, and much feeling for the rest of the world as well as ourselves” (Eliot 1946, 376). Independent of any authority, she has found her occupation and identity as a caretaker and mentor. As asserted by one critic, “Eliot identifies womanliness with love, and affection, sympathy, submission and suffering in silence” (De Jong 1984, 80). However, Romola knew that her goal in life is not simply to fill the roles of sister, daughter, wife and mother, but to be actively involved in social life. In his recent article, Daniel S. Malachuk puts forward a persuasive argument: “Romola seems at last to endorse a kind of virtue that does not sustain the old political structures so much as look beyond them, to a world that protects and cultivates individual liberty without recourse to these hoary old tools of state”, the ideas of Machiavelli or Savonarola (2008, 52). In the novel’s exploration of the nature of freedom, Romola’s story becomes, in Uglow’s words, “a parable of the way, men (in Victorian England rather than renaissance Florence) define women –as daughter, wife, mother or guardian angel- and the way women can free themselves from these stereotypes” (1987, 161).

Avram Fleishman draws attention to how George Eliot was aware of the dual strain on the Renaissance -centering on its degree of continuity with the Middle Ages and the significance of its rediscovery of antiquity long before the great debate of modern historians. The structure of *Romola* is such as to dramatize this duality: the marriage and conflict of Tito and Romola are the conflict of “Renaissance naturalism and individualism with its inherited tradition of piety and asceticism” (Fleishman 1971, 155). Eliot never forgot Renaissance and its depth of its traditional Christianity besides the enlightened spirit of Renaissance Humanism. Therefore, she chose the period of Savonarola’s brief revivalist movement as one that expressed the conflict of its underlying attitudes. Sixteenth century Florence, like nineteenth-century England, is in a period of transition, “it needs a new principle of social and spiritual organization” (Uglow 1987, 161). *Romola* remains of interest for what it conveys of “the perplexities of the liberal-conservative intellectual in the 1860s” (Rance 1975, 103). However, Eliot wrote a Renaissance novel not, in an attempt to recapture the spirit of the century, but on the contrary, to demonstrate that there is no historical uniqueness to strive after. More deliberately, Eliot considered social progress and historical change with the evolution of individuals and she subordinated events to emotions. She attributed historical significance to the individual moral life.

In her essay of 1856 titled “The Antigone and its Morals”, George Eliot makes the moral a key to historical interpretation: “preach against false doctrines, you disturb feeble minds and send them adrift on a sea of doubt; (...) wherever the strength of a man’s intellect, or moral sense, or affection brings him into opposition with the rules which society has sanctioned, there is renewed the conflict between Antigone and Creon” (Eliot 1856, 364).

Eliot modernizes Antigone and Creon as Romola and Savonarola in this novel. Romola is sometimes called as “Madonna Antigone” (1946, 264). Rather than repeating history’s great men on their immortality, Eliot’s narrative proceeds to detail the decadence of public men and the ascent of a heroine to supplant him. Romola starts as a fairy tale princess who is sealed up in an ancient house with a blind father, the scholar Bardo, and finally she becomes a rebel. As Alison Booth maintains, “Eliot deliberately recalls the tradition of romance with her errant protagonist’s name. Although ‘Romola’ is the name of an actual village near Florence, it also implies the feminine form of ‘Romulus’, the founder of an empire. The only novel Eliot entitled after the heroine thus in effect feminizes the heroic or epic” (1992, 184). A woman’s education and life journey magically coincide with the history of a particular time period, and history becomes the biography of a great woman this time. Romola is one of Eliot’s sample characters to define a learned and cultured woman who knows her place and importance in the society. Eliot in her famous essay, “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” declares what she really means by the true role of a “really cultured woman” in the society:

A really cultured woman, like a really cultured man, is all the simpler and the less obtrusive for her knowledge; it has made her see herself and her opinions in something like just proportions; she does not make it a pedestal from which she flatters herself that she commands a complete view of men and things, but makes it a point of observation from which to form a right estimate of herself. (...) She does not write books to confound philosophers, perhaps because she is able to write books that delight them. In conversation she is the least formidable of women, because she understands you, without wanting to make you aware that you can’t understand her. She does not give you information, which is the raw material of culture -she gives you sympathy, which is its subtlest essence (1856, 454).

This quotation makes Eliot’s thoughts about women writers almost clear. What did she think of history and historiography? She wrote in “Leaves from a Notebook” that she wanted “something different from the abstract treatment which belongs to grave history from a doctrinal point of view, and something different from the schemed picturesqueness of ordinary historical fiction,” and she continued that she wanted to see “severely conscientious reproductions, in their concrete incidents, of pregnant movements in the past” (1963, 446-7). In her famous essay “Historic Imagination” Eliot writes about “the exercise of a veracious imagination in historical picturing.” By veracious imagination, she meant “the working out in detail of the various steps by which a political or social change was reached.” Eliot continues her essay with some questions to promote inquiry: “how triumphed opinions originally spread -how institutions arose -what were the conditions of great inventions, discoveries, or theoretical conceptions -what circumstances affecting individual lots are attendant on the decay of long-established systems.” She finally states her belief that “all these grand elements of history require the illumination of special imaginative treatment” (1963, 432).

Therefore, Eliot evaluates historical imagination as the capacity to move from the part to the whole, from the unique historical fact to its place in the larger scene of reality. Likewise, the novel *Romola* is decorated with cultural and social data out of which the characters draw their ideas, values, and opinions. Renaissance is a triumph in the history of intellectual liberation, yet for Eliot it is also a time of individual's dethronement of false idols and realization of capacities for self-determination. The measure of Eliot's achievement in *Romola* lies in the application of her conception of realism to the historical novel. Furthermore, Eliot's method of grafting of a philosophical message onto a historical novel brings a new interpretation of history.

Finally, reading *Romola* from a feminist perspective reveals that the novel stimulates vital questions about the literary representation of female experience and the role of women in historical past. For instance, to what extent is the narrator of *Romola* implicated in the myths of objectivity and the conventions of realism? Or how far can Eliot draw the big picture with authentic details of private, feminine, or common life? Can her emphasis change the entire aesthetic, epistemological, and ethical frame? In retrospect, Eliot apparently saw the novel as feminist and herself a feminist writer. In the nineteenth century, the traditional image of the historian was of a man whose image remained almost unchallenged; and objectivity remained an attractive aspiration; however, George Eliot adopted the impersonal role of the historian in *Romola* which was a means of escaping the boundaries of self while synthesizing the details of the past. As Booth, the writer of *Greatness Engendered*, maintains, Eliot's work "shatters the illusion of objective order and challenges the possibility of manly indifference in historical interpretation" (1992, 84). At the same time, Eliot's feminist perspective on history forced a reevaluation of the class system of data -the privileging of certain public facts over the mass of private detail. Most importantly, Eliot centered her novel on what might be called "the history question" which is intimately linked to "the woman question". In her historical romance, she reevaluated heroism vs. selflessness of femininity in romance tradition. Contributing her own revisionary historical writing to a literature predominantly written by men, Eliot managed not to remain anonymous as she gave voice to those whose lives remained unnoticed.

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## Öz

### **Romans Geleneği ve Tarihyazımı: George Eliot'ın *Romola* Eserindeki Feminist Söylem**

İngiliz yazar, Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot) için toplumsal cinsiyet, üzerine düşünülüp, tartışılması gereken bir olgudur. İlk bakışta, Eliot'ın eserini romans geleneği çerçevesinde tartışmak uygun olmayabilir; çünkü yazar, bir makalesinde, romansı kültürsüz kadınların yazma sevdalarını tatmin ettikleri bir tür olarak tanımlar. Oysa ki bu çalışmada romans türünün yazara, toplumsal cinsiyet rollerini ve tarih yazımını gözden geçirmesi için bir zemin hazırladığı tartışılmaktadır. Romans türü, kadın tarihleri yazılırken, Tarihin eril diline karşılık alternatif bir söylem getirmektedir. Bu yazı, George Eliot'ın on beşinci yüzyıl Floransa'sında geçen ve tarihi arka planını çok iyi araştırarak kurguladığı *Romola* (1863) romanı aracılığıyla toplumsal cinsiyet ve tarih yazımı konularını romans türü çerçevesinde ele alacaktır.

### **Anahtar Kelimeler**

George Eliot, *Romola*, romans geleneği, feminist söylem ve tarih yazımı

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### **Yazar Hakkında**

**Aylin Atilla**, Ege Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü'nde öğretim üyesidir. Doktorasını aynı üniversitede 2006 yılında tamamlamış ve kitap olarak yayınlamıştır (*Historiography and the English Novel*). Tarih yazımı, toplumsal cinsiyet ve temsilleri, travma ve bellek gibi konuları ve çağdaş İngiliz romanını içeren yayınlanmış makaleleri bulunmaktadır.