Gender and Victorian Reform

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CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS
PUBLISHING

Gender and Victorian Reform, Edited by Anita Rose

This book first published 2008

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-0067-8, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-0067-9

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INTRODUCTION

In October of 2006, The Victorians Institute (VI), a scholarly organization with an international membership,[1] met on the campus of Converse College in Spartanburg, South Carolina.[2] Converse, founded in 1889, is a residential, undergraduate women's college with a strong focus on the liberal and fine arts. Given the history and traditions of Converse, conference organizers agreed that it was appropriate for the conference to address the topic of gender in Victorian England. More specifically, the theme of "Gender and Victorian Reform," addressed the profound influences that women reformers had in nineteenth-century England, but it also acknowledged the subtle and powerful role that gender and gender identity played in a much broader sense. In addition to investigating the more readily apparent instances of gender concerns that shaped reform,[3] participants in this conference examined the structure of charitable organizations, the interpretation of language and literacy, ideas of beauty, and religion through the lens of gender.

Gender, in the nineteenth century as now, was indeed an integral part of identity, providing a lens through which the world is understood, and this more elusive influence of gender on reform provided a rich source of scholarship and discussion at the Converse gathering. Now, in 2008, gender plays a prominent role in the political landscape of America in an election year. Gender and reform are once again linked in politics and the public imagination, and it seems fitting to revisit the nineteenth century to remind ourselves that gender, along with race, and class, has long been a vital part of public discourse about social concerns and reform.

Reform in the Nineteenth century

The reforming spirit was one of the hallmarks of the Victorian era in England (1830 – 1901).[4] Victorian philosophers, politicians, artists, writers and activists of all predilections considered the tremendous changes in physical science, religious thought, ideas about human psychology, economic relationships, education, and technological achievements.[5] New developments on every front of human endeavor very literally changed perceptions of what it meant to be human. This, in turn, led to a great deal of collective, as well as individual, soul searching.[6] Consequently, the

impulse to use this newly acquired knowledge to right perceived inequities and injustices was strong; throughout the nineteenth century, there were major legislative reforms for almost every important social institution. Reforms to redress injustices related to limits on suffrage, religious discrimination, abuse of workers – men, women, and children – and wretched sanitary conditions in the cities evolved throughout the century.

Gender and Reform

Social reform by its very definition implies a disruption of the status quo, and wide-ranging reform, such as was seen in the nineteenth century, speaks to a need to "clean house," figuratively as well as literally. A partial breakdown of the social order developed in part as a result of the Industrial Revolution's uprooting of an agricultural England. The safety net provided by the landed aristocracy and the church became frayed as people moved from the countryside into the cities, their rural occupations supplanted by more efficient, mechanized means of farming and production. The only place for unskilled workers seemed to be in the industrial cities of the North – Engels' "Great Towns."[7] Rapid social change, and its attendant problems, demanded serious domestic reforms. Middle-class Victorian women, long charged with the supervision of the moral and physical health of the family— and, it can be argued, by extension the nation—became increasingly active in the public sphere. These women, often celebrated as the "angels in the house," demonstrated a growing political awareness, and gender became both an overt and a covert factor in reform movements. Equally important, women writers were producing respected and respectable works of literature, and perhaps naturally brought a different sensibility to art itself on a national scale.

The essays in this collection are arranged into four parts: Part I considers both historical context for reform and revisits the historical romance through the lens of gender. Daniel Siegel examines the role and function of the "bible woman" of the Female Bible Mission— a uniquely Victorian figure who often provided a link between the lower classes in desperate need of aid, and the upper classes who were in a position to give it. Chad May discusses George Eliot's only historical novel, *Romola,* and suggests that Eliot re-visioned the role of the romantic heroine of the Sir Walter Scott mold, while Laura Fasick compares ideas about the role of women's education in social evolution in Tennyson's *The Princess* and the Gilbert and Sullivan libretto for *Princess Ida.* The second group of essays addresses more specifically the role of women in public life and in the professions. Audrey Fessler, Laura Rotunno, and Andre' DeCuir examine

fictional characters from canonical texts in terms of how gender affects both a reforming spirit and the means by which reform is achieved. The essays in Part III, "Genre, Literacy, and Reform," focus even more specifically on the connections among reform, gender, literacy and literary genre in the novels of Wilkie Collins (Bachman and Chernik), Charlotte Bronte (Lorentzen), and Elizabeth Gaskell (McGavran).

Finally, the four essays in the "Expanded Perspectives" section offer readings that are at once diverse and specialized. Margaret Mitchell discusses Charlotte Bronte's treatment of beauty in *Shirley*; Chris Foss introduces the reader to Indo-Anglian writer Toru Dutt and the intersections of western and eastern religion in her writing. Loretta Clayton and Maggie Atkinson consider the politics of dress and ornamentation in late nineteenth century England.

Taken as a whole, the scholarly works in this collection reflect on the more subtle threads of gender as they bind together gender concerns, questions of class and identity, language and education, and the politicizing of the middle-class. The essays offer a serious consideration of the role of gender in art and in public life that spans the Victorian era. Reformist impulses are revealed in a number of Victorian texts that are not generally read as overtly political. In this way, this collection, and the conference that gave rise to it, thoughtfully focuses on the influence of gender on a wide range of social movements, and moves the significance of gender beyond simply the content of Victorian fiction and the identity of the authors and into the more fundamental connection of discourse to reform.

Notes

[1] http://www.vcu.edu/vij/.

[2] http://www.converse.edu.

[3] I think here of "obvious" gender issues, like marriage law reform, suffrage, and women's education.

[4] One of the most accessible and comprehensive sources for a brief history of Victorian reform is on the Victorian Web, http://www.victorianweb.org/history/legistl.html. This timeline of Victorian legislation gives an overview of the major legislative reform acts throughout the nineteenth century, beginning with the 1828 repeal of the test acts, allowing dissenters to participate in national and local government and ending with the 1897 Workmen's Compensation Act.

[5] Consider that the latter half of the nineteenth century was witness to profound changes in the way life was conducted, in both small ways and great. The theories

of evolution (1859), and Marxist economics (1860s), and psychoanalysis (1896), became part of the collective consciousness. Technological wonders like the telegraph (1837), the trans-Atlantic cable (1858), the typewriter (1873), the telephone (1876), and the incandescent lamp (1879), changed the way people lived and communicated.

[6] One of the more famous instances of this Victorian introspection is Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. Tennyson's masterpiece is at once an example of both a public and private search for meaning and purpose.

[7] For further reading, see Engels, http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/condition-working-class/ch04.htm.

PART I

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS AND THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

CHAPTER ONE

CHARITY THROUGH DISSOCIATION: THE TASK OF THE BIBLE-WOMAN

DANIEL SIEGEL

The Missing Link (1859), Ellen Ranyard's account of the origin and work of the Female Bible Mission suggests, by its title, that something in the machinery of charity has become unfastened. Ranyard's explicit reference is to the gulf between the classes; in hoping to bridge that gulf she was like many other philanthropists of her day, who felt that the task of philanthropy was to restore the organic ties that had once subsisted between rich and poor. The visiting societies sent out lady volunteers to frequent the homes of the poor and offer their advice, their prayers, and their companionship, an office traditionally performed by rural clergy and their families. In a modern urban variation on the country estate, Octavia Hill developed a scheme to purchase and transform slum tenements, binding together tenant, landlady, and rent collector through economic exchanges and community interests. The settlement movement, too, tried to create community between the classes, as educated men and women of the middle class took up residence in East London and engaged their new neighborhoods in a variety of intellectual and practical enterprises. All of these initiatives sought modern, innovative methods to recover what they considered the traditional social purpose of charity. But the modern charity industry gave rise to a new set of polarizations, based on disagreements over the proper methods and legitimate purposes of charity; particularly contentious were the debates over the effects of monetary gifts, and the relationship between spiritual and material help. Here is another way in which Ranyard's Female Bible Mission was to be a missing link: it would incorporate the methods that typified several different, often divergent, approaches to philanthropy. Ranyard's push for reconciliation, then, took place on two fronts: she wished both to build social bridges between rich and poor, and to forge some sort of coherence among the charitable efforts

that were increasingly felt, by those involved, to be pulling in different directions.

The first of these aims—to find a new way to "reconnect" rich and poor—is the central idea that underlies the strange constitution of Ranyard's organization. The Bible Mission effectively took the conventional role of the middle-class visitor and divided it in two: a working-class Bible-woman would visit the homes of the poor, and a lady superintendent would manage these operations at a distance.[1] The Bible-woman would provide a needed channel of communication between the classes, helping to weed out the presumption and mistrust that so often poisoned the work of charity. Ranyard created this protocol in 1857 in response to a letter from Marian Bowers, a working woman looking for a way to help her fellow poor. Ranyard decided that in Marian she had found "a missing link," a woman who could gain access to "a class of persons below the decent poor."[2] Marian and other women of her class would be accepted in households where the lady visitor was unwelcome, and in this way they themselves, simply by virtue of their identity, would embody the social bridges that philanthropists often struggled in vain to build. The Bible-woman's job was to sell Bibles to the poor, usually in weekly installments; when inside a poor woman's home, the Bible visitor might help her with her cooking, cleaning, and needlework. Poor families could also subscribe for goods other than the Bible, such as clothes and bedding. The mission was well-funded, and its clothing clubs were enormously popular. Aside from the sheer volume of its transactions, the Bible mission was significant for its organizational structure. Whereas the Bible-women themselves were all to be recruited from the working classes, every Bible-woman was then supervised by a lady volunteer who handled the administrative and economic aspects of the work. This arrangement seemed ideal: philanthropists had what were effectively a corps of ambassadors to the poor, ambassadors who would ensure that the help that was offered in a spirit of good will would be received in the same spirit.

Ranyard also tackled the growing rifts within the charity industry itself, an industry built around a diverse and not always compatible set of principles. Among other issues, philanthropists disagreed whether their first priority should be the eternal or the temporal welfare of the poor—that is, whether it was the bodies or the souls of the poor that needed saving, or whether one might be saved en route to saving the other. Here, too, Ellen Ranyard saw herself as a bridge-builder; her Bible missions would, in a radical way, reconcile the material and the spiritual aspects of charity.[3] Of course the Bible-women traded in both spiritual and physical

necessities, providing Bibles on one day and blankets on another, but they went further than this: by requiring poor families to pay for the Bibles by subscription, they tied their religious ministry to their economic regimen. Part of the organization's mission was to teach thrift to the poor, and to encourage poor families to invest in their own spiritual uplift. Hence, if you didn't pay, you didn't get a Bible. To offer spiritual help free of charge was like offering alms: it would put the poor in the position of paupers, dependent for their spiritual welfare on the attentions of the prosperous classes. Better that they should toil and pay for their Bibles, and thus know that they truly owned them. Ranyard's Bible missions, then, linked the pastoral tradition of charity to a modern economic sensibility.

The Bible-women movement was therefore distinctive for its capaciousness, employing different types of worker (rich and poor) and including of different types of mission (spiritual and economic). Frank Prochaska sees its variety as its virtue; he characterizes the mission as "an ingenious mixture of paid and volunteer, working-class and middle-class workers respectively."[4] And yet, while the complexity of the mixture may have been a resource, it was also a cause for self-interrogation. In *The Missing Link*, far from obviating questions of class, the "ingenious" arrangement requires the various workers to become even more conscious of their position within the machine, and to articulate which functions precisely are proper to which workers. Likewise, the Bible-women's multiple missions require untangling; much of *The Missing Link* discusses the need, given the organization's diverse kinds of work, to make sure each type of work happens in its proper time and place. Mary Poovey points out the difficulty that Ranyard and her Bible-women had segregating the Bible work from the domestic work; Poovey sees this difficulty as growing out of a tension between abstract economic rationality and the more immediate experience of poverty that the workers brought to bear.[5] However we account for the tensions within the movement, it is significant that those tensions are so insistently foregrounded within *The Missing Link*, the book where Ranyard attempts to articulate a unified charity. In this, I will argue, Ranyard's treatise has much to say about the barriers that divide charity workers and charity schemes from one another. If anything, the modernity of Ranyard's movement comes not from its success in ironing out the wrinkles of the charity enterprise, but from bringing them to the surface and, largely, making use of them. Notwithstanding her own urgent calls for a unified charity, Ranyard actually created a protocol that accepted and adapted

itself to the communication gap between rich and poor and the incoherence of philanthropic missions.

The impulse to differentiate, for instance, comes through in the way the Bible-woman is figured as the "missing link" between the classes. This is a strange way of thinking about class relations. Of course Ranyard, like many other philanthropists, laments the lack of community between rich and poor. But other philanthropists look to restore this community through some kind of social principle, whether sympathy, or duty, or citizenship, or collaboration. Ranyard's idea that she has found the missing link, and that it is in fact a new class of person, is highly unusual to say the least. Ranyard's usage of this term obviously predates the common late-century reference to the evolutionary link between apes and humans, and yet some of the same logic applies. The missing link is both perfectly natural and utterly monstrous. On the one hand, a missing link simply shares the qualities of two other entities that are well known and that are known to relate to one another, so that it is in some sense the most natural thing of all: even before it is discovered, it can almost be extrapolated into existence. On the other hand, precisely because it is theoretical and not real, a missing link is unnatural; it is the thing that should exist but doesn't, and if it were ever encountered, it could only be experienced as "neither this nor that." Abstract as this discussion is, it seems to have some bearing on the Bible-woman, who is in crucial ways like both the middle-class missionary and the poor petitioner, but could never blend in with either group. In some real sense, the relationship that the Bible-woman creates between the classes takes place wholly within herself. She doesn't *create* a link, as other philanthropists wished to do; instead she *is* the link, straddling two worlds, and holding them apart as surely as she holds them together. No matter how successful the Bible missions were, Ranyard's initiative abandoned the idea of class *contact* that was so central to the mainstream charity protocols. If mainstream visiting failed because either the visitor or the visited balked at the sight of the other, the Bible missions could succeed by interposing a proxy in between the classes, one who might productively stand between the contenders.

Despite the idea that the Bible-woman is a sort of "intermediate form," she does not pass for rich among the rich, poor among the poor. It is the opposite: the Bible-woman becomes the sign, both among her philanthropic colleagues and among her destitute neighbors, of the other. In this sense, Ranyard's organization takes for granted a fundamental dissociation of the classes and even embraces this distance, supplying both rich and poor with a new kind of person who can stand in for the alien, uncooperative person at the other end of the charity transaction. The Bible

worker would give a new face to middle-class charity, a face in which the poor woman might catch a reflection of her own, a face in which the lady volunteer could always find a welcome reception. Marian's slum expeditions are dramas of identification, where she is repeatedly transformed from an invader to a fellow sufferer. "I am quite as poor as you are," she assures the people that she visits, and they seem to rally around this idea.[6] When someone pours a bucket of filth on Marian from an upper window, the ground-level tenants gather to help her; "on the whole her friends exceeded her foes," Ranyard says, "and from the date of this roughly commenced acquaintance she numbers several of her best friends."[7] When Marian goes into Soho and Whitechapel she hears some people say, "What use is it to come with the Bible here? It is not for such as we are." But others answer, "Ah, let her come; I wish we were like her!"[8] At once a stranger and a neighbor, Marian makes others of her class want to emulate her, a power that the middle-class philanthropist seemed unable to achieve. At the same time, for the philanthropist, the Bible-woman plays the role of the perfect sufferer, the quintessentially deserving poor. For example, Ellen Ranyard notes that the Bible-woman Sarah "is one who herself slept last winter without a blanket, for the sake of others. She is sometimes almost desperate on behalf of the people she sees. God help her in her efforts, and the people in their misery!"[9] The kind of suffering Sarah undergoes is not really available to the middle class volunteer who, no matter how hard she works, will return to a comfortable home. Sarah, by contrast, is exchanging her comfort for that of her neighbor. She has the power of impoverishing herself. And in her admiration, Ranyard offers a benediction for both Sarah and "the people she sees": they together constitute the community of the poor. Sarah is praised not for her philanthropic acumen, but for her nobility in suffering.

Indeed, even the idea that the Bible-woman, as a missing link, has brought rich and poor into contact with one another, is a strange departure from the account Ranyard actually provides of her first exchange with Marian. The exchange certainly emphasizes the question of class contact, but Marian does not emerge as some sort of automatic native ambassador to the slums. Instead, she herself appeals to Ranyard to provide her with some way to interact with her own neighbors. Marian explains that she is interested in helping "the lost and degraded of my own sex, whom, from their vicious lives, no tenderly reared female would be likely to approach" (20). In this sense the philanthropist needs Marian's help to establish contact with the outcast. And yet the fact that Marian writes this petition at all implies that she needs the help of the philanthropist as well. In the petition, Marian simply asks to be told where such sufferers live, but it is

clear that Ranyard believes that Marian also needs to be taught how to help them. Marian must go through the middle-class charity establishment in order to reach other women of her own class, suggesting that the rich are implicated even in the way that the poor relate to one another. Indeed, as Marian's petition describes the details of her own religious conversion, it seems that her piety and insight have on the one hand equipped her to help her neighbors, and on the other hand raised her above them. Just as a missionary lifted Marian out of the dens of vice, she needs a missionary to put her back in. In other words, while the success of middle-class charity depends on the working-class agent, there also can't be any kind of successful working-class ministry that doesn't involve middle-class direction. Marian vindicates the importance of differentiation and the power, within the charity enterprise, of the division of labor.

Just as the Female Bible Mission underscored the difficult distance between rich and poor, it acknowledged the ways in which the manifest aims of charity could work at cross-purposes. Take, as an example, an excerpt from one Bible-woman's journal of her work in Clerkenwell.

> "Here, you Bible-woman," called out a young man who had paid a penny for a Bible last week—"here's your penny for the Book, but you never told me you sold shirts. Don't you see, I've no mother, and I want a shirt—the Bible won't clothe me."
>
> "But," I said, "it will teach you to clothe yourself. However, I do not sell shirts at this time; I only sell Bibles. If you want a shirt, you can have one; it is ready made for you—a good strong working shirt; you must send your sixpence by some woman you know, to my clothing-club room on Wednesday nights, and you may get a shirt for 1s. 6d., but I cannot take your money now."
>
> "I think," said an old man, one of his fellow workmen, "you might as well take mine. I was going in for a glass of gin, but I'll give you this twopence for a shirt. I would not give it you for a book." "I hope you will some day," I said, "when you hear more about the Book; but I suppose I must take it for the shirt, to save it from the gin-shop, only it is not my rule. I do one thing at a time."[10]

This is a strange kind of testament to the Bible-woman's effectiveness, or to the coherence of her mission. For one thing, neither man wants the Bibles she's selling; in fact one of them wants to cancel his Bible subscription when he finds out he can have a shirt for the same price. The Bible-woman's various enterprises, in other words, seem to be in competition with one another. As if to keep these parallel missions from impinging on each other, the Bible-woman tries to avoid selling Bibles and shirts at the same time, but, as the Bible is in this scheme a commodity

like other commodities, this "rule" of hers cannot hold up. The market is the market, and a sixpence is a sixpence.

Throughout Ranyard's accounts of the Bible missions, the blending of spiritual and temporal aid does not happen very smoothly or easily; indeed, the rules of the organization seem to force the Bible-women to pry these things apart at every point. It turns out that Sarah's rule isn't simply her own; the Bible-women are instructed to do the Bible work on certain days, and the domestic work on others. And they're always to make the same mysterious response: "I do one thing at a time." This cryptic utterance is explained in the constitution of the organization:

> The Bible-woman may be employed for two, three, four, or five days, ONLY IN SELLING BIBLES, according to the needs of the particular district, and for this ONLY the Bible Society can pay her. She must not do any other work at the same time. If the people offer to subscribe for clothing and beds, she will say, "I only do one thing at a time," and "the right thing first. I bring you now the Message from God. I shall be glad also to provide you with clothing, &c., at the lowest prices, and for this you can pay as you do for the Bibles, in small sums weekly; but you must COME TO ME to do this, at a certain hour, in my Mission-room." There would be great evil in mixing the two departments of labor; the Bible Society would never know what they paid for, and mistakes would be made in the accounts . . .[11]

Poovey cites this passage as evidence of "the tension between the conditions of almost limitless need that Bible women encountered in poor homes and a system that sought to rationalize poor women's efforts to help each other."[12] In one sense, we could read this sort of tension as a testament to the inadequacy of such philanthropic rationales, where the careful work of differentiation betrays the real impossibility of creating a system to answer the demands of poverty. And yet the very clumsiness of the accommodation speaks to a sort of hypersensitivity folded into the charity interaction, a way in which rich and poor are awkwardly required to think about the specific character of (respectively) their resources and their needs. In particular, the difference between spiritual and material help is emphasized in a way it wouldn't be for an organization less determined to make those into parallel and equal aims. This emphasis comes out elsewhere in a related rule that requires the Bible-woman to remind the poor that their pennies are not, in reality, covering the costs of the Bibles, which are mainly paid for by the British and Foreign Bible Society. Thus the Bible-work is differentiated from a fully economic exchange; if the Bible is in one sense purchased, it is in a fuller sense bequeathed.

Strangely, in Ranyard's account, the Bible-woman's mixed messages seem to make her more, not less, effective. The Bible-woman is an oddity, a puzzle, and as such she offers an alternative to business as usual. At least this is the feeling one gets from some of the stories the Bible-women tell, stories in which they surprise the cynical poor into attentiveness. Sarah recalls a man who snapped at her, "That's all you religious people think about—if you can thrust a Bible or a tract down our throats, it will do as well as food. Now, I have five children and a wife, and no work." Sarah's response takes the man by surprise: she says, "My good man, you quite mistake me if you think I want you to live on the Bible. I only want you to live by its precepts, that you may be led to call on him who careth for you in all things, and died to save you, that by his stripes you may be healed." The man then relents: "Well, then, put down my name; I'll have a Bible."[13] While it's possible that Sarah's religious message has a touched a chord in the man's heart, his response doesn't seem especially spiritual; he mainly seems grateful for Sarah's unusual concession, her acknowledgment that he is right, that he can't live on the Bible. In Ranyard's book, the Bible-woman's best weapon is that her methods are strange and unexpected. For instance, in her first letter to Ranyard, Marian happily envisions the following scenario: she will attempt to sell the Bible in the morning, she'll be rejected, and she'll then return to the same home in the evening and perform "some kind office," at which point the man or woman of the house will allow her to read from the Bible at last.[14] It's telling that Marian's philanthropic fantasy involves an initial failure and a change of tactic; why not just use the right tactic to begin with? The idea, I would contend, is that this failure, along with all of the awkwardness of the Bible visits, open the door for something new or unexpected. Lest this argument seem too bizarre, I want to point out that the idea of a first failure is common in Victorian narratives of charity. Consider Esther and Ada's first visit to the brickmaker's cottage, or Dinah Morris's early attempts to comfort Hetty Sorrel: in these and other cases, the rituals and conventions of charity fail, and in the ensuing social vacuum, the characters are able to forge authentic connections.

Ranyard's efforts to build bridges can certainly seem less elegant, less innovative, than some of the work of her fellow philanthropists, especially as she seems so often to emphasize the very divisions she wants to reconcile. But there is also something modern about this. Rather than try to reconstitute a bygone age, Ranyard's missions are bound up in the contemporary scene, with all of its problems; they wage their battles within the social world of the present moment, and never imagine a society constructed on different principles. Paradoxically—and maybe to

its credit—Ranyard's scheme for social cohesion actually reveals a felt need for a more detached charity, one whose success wouldn't depend on the fraught personal exchanges between rich and poor.

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Notes

[1] Frank Prochaska refers to the Bible-woman as "an ingenious variant of the district visitor." Prochaska, "Body and Soul: Bible Nurses and the Poor in Victorian London," 338.

[2] Ranyard, *The Missing Link*, 37.

[3] It should be noted, as Mary Poovey points out, that Ranyard's Bible Mission was not "the only society committed to collecting contributions from the poor." Poovey, *Making a Social Body*, 195 n.57.

[4] Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England*, 128. Elsewhere, Prochaska presents Ranyard's Bible Mission as one of the most extensive examples of charitable cooperation between classes: see Frank Prochaska, "Philanthropy," in *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750–1950*, edited by F. M. L. Thompson, 368.

[5] Poovey, 46–51.

[6] Ranyard, 30.

[7] Ibid., 30.

[8] Ibid., 29.

[9] Ibid., 95.

[10] Ranyard, 97–98.

[11] Ibid., 300.

[12] Poovey, 46.

[13] Ranyard, 103.
[14] Ibid., 24–25.

CHAPTER TWO

REFORMING HISTORY: GEORGE ELIOT'S *ROMOLA*

CHAD MAY

At the close of the eighteenth century, the convergence of Enlightenment theories of cultural change, the rise of antiquarian societies, the birth of nationalism,[1] and a sense of the radical distance between past and present produced by the French Revolution, worked to generate a different conception of history. This newly emergent romantic historicism would initiate the creation of the historical novel and the eventual transformation of history into a professional discipline. Perhaps the most important result, however, was the separation of historical writing from the model of political conflict. In place of wars and kings was a definition of history which could potentially "include . . . all aspects of experience."[2] Ultimately, the practitioners of this new movement were interested in those figures that a traditional political history had marginalized. As Nina Baym and Rohan Amanda Maitzen have recently demonstrated, the romantic focus on social and cultural history in both England and America allowed women to become visible as historical subjects. Yet, the opportunity to write about previously unexplored aspects of the past generated difficulties. New subjects and approaches to history required the transformation or abandonment of existing discursive models. As Ann Rigney suggests, "the representability of a particular aspect of the past has its own history. . . . It is constituted over time according to the changing interests of historians . . . [and] the development of new discursive forms."[3] In her only historical novel, *Romola*, George Eliot succeeds in producing an account in which women appear as historical agents. However, to open up a space in which such a history can be told, Eliot adopts and modifies the discursive structures of her predecessor, Sir Walter Scott. Specifically, Eliot employs the romantic figure of loss and suffering so central to the Waverly Novels. However, unlike Scott, who allows such figures to appear in his narratives as symbols of historical

trauma, but then expels them through death, Eliot transforms the romantic and suffering female into a site from which social authority and historical agency can emerge.

Whereas most historical fiction places women in the role of marginal figures who lie outside the movement of history, Eliot's title suggests that she intends to do just the opposite, to place a female protagonist at the center of her text. And yet for any reader what is perhaps most striking is Romola's near absence from the first half of the novel. Instead of its heroine, the narrative focuses on two figures: the fictional Tito Melema, who rises from a shipwrecked wanderer to an influential scholar and politician, and the historical monk Girolamo Savonarola, who, at the end of the fifteenth century, attempted to reform both the political system of Florence and the Catholic Church. In other words, despite the suggestion of the title, the texts opens with the type of political and historical narrative that so often excluded women.

Initially, Romola is prevented from emerging as a presence in the narrative due to the influence of her father, Bardo Bardi, a blind scholar who Romola has devoted her life to assisting. Romola's subservient position within her father's home arises from the absence of his son Dino, who has abandoned the family for his religious calling. Romola can only partially fill the space opened up by his departure. Despite his constant belief that "the sustained zeal and unconquerable patience demanded from those who would tread the unbeaten paths of knowledge are [not] reconcilable with the wandering vagrant propensity of the feminine mind,"[4] Bardo hopes that Romola's assistance will allow him to generate a lasting fame through his scholarship and library of ancient texts. Consequently, Romola is dominated by the "lifeless objects [of the library] . . . - the parchment backs, the unchanging mutilated marble, the bits of obsolete bronze and clay" and by the literal and figurative hand of her father "with its massive . . . rings, [which he let] fall a little too heavily on the delicate blue-veined back of [Romola's] hand."[5] Both the task, which is not of her choosing, and her father's belief that she is inadequate ensure that Romola's position is one of inconsequence and futility. It is clear that even as her father demands so much of her, it is only his historical presence as a scholar that is at stake and not the possible contribution of her "wandering . . . mind."[6] Her marriage to Tito represents only a continuation of her self-effacement in the dreams of her father; he is the new son who will allow Bardo to complete his work: "'Yes father,' said Romola, firmly. 'I love Tito – I wish to marry him, that we may both be your children and never part.'"[7] Yet Tito, like Dino, is drawn out into the concerns of the wider world.

These two male figures not only fail to fulfill the role of son that Romola has taken upon herself, they also serve initially to define the two modes by which she comprehends the world outside her father's home. Visiting her brother on his death bed, Romola is given an account of his visionary apprehensions regarding her future. As she later explains to Tito, although never fully reconciled to her brother's betrayal of the family, Romola cannot forget what his death and his faith suggest to her of the world: "The yearning look at the crucifix when he was gasping for breath – I can never forget it. Last night I looked at the crucifix a long while, and tried to see that it would help him, until at last it seemed to me by the lamplight as if the suffering face shed pity."[8] As the narrator informs us, in the sheltered world of her father's library, Romola has "known nothing of the utmost human needs; no acute suffering – no heart-cutting sorrow."[9] Dino's death and his faith, particularly the image of human suffering and sympathy embodied in the crucifix, suggest a new dimension to the world, one which she has never considered before.

Tito provides a counter image. Continually connected through his own words and those of the narrator to Bacchus and the sun-god Apollo, he promises to lock "all sadness away from" Romola.[10] In effect, Tito has done so with his own life, refusing to give up his prosperous position in Florence to find and ransom his imprisoned father, Baldassarre:

> What, looked at closely, was the end of all life, but to extract the utmost sum of pleasure? And was not his own blooming life a promise of incomparably more pleasure, not for himself only, but for others, than the withered wintry life of a man who was past the time of keen enjoyment, and whose ideas had stiffened into barren rigidity?[11]

For Tito, the sorrow of life can be banished, in this case in the form of an old man who had fathered him, but who must suffer in his stead. Unlike the image of the crucifix which offers a public display of the need for sacrifice in a world defined by suffering, Tito believes all sorrow can be hidden away. For this reason, on the day of their wedding, Tito places the crucifix within a triptych decorated with a triumphant image of Ariadne and Bacchus.[12] As he says to Romola, "You have done with sadness now; and we will bury all images of it – bury them in a tomb of joy."[13]

For Romola, the contrast between her brother and Tito is irreconcilable:

> Strange, bewildering transition from those pale images of sorrow and death to this bright youthfulness, as of a sun-god who knew nothing of night! What thought could reconcile the worn anguish in her brother's face-

> that straining after something invisible-with this satisfied strength and beauty, and make it intelligible that they belonged to the same world?[14]

Ultimately, both extremes represent a flight from the world. In the latter, suffering is denied and erased. In the former, its contemplation has the potential to conceal all other aspects of existence, as is the case with Romola's brother, who finds himself detached from "human sympathies which are the very life and substance of our wisdom."[15]

It is to the world of sorrow that Romola will be taken. However, in this case suffering will be tied to sympathy and social action. In fact, Romola is only able to emerge as a forceful and active presence in the narrative after becoming the victim of an "acute suffering."[16] When Tito sells her father's library, a collection he had pledged to help maintain, Romola recoils from both the betrayal and her husband. Watching her father's life work slowly being carted away while hearing the celebratory bells of Florence, Romola imagines the sound as "the triumph of demons at the success of her husband's treachery, and the desolation of her life . . . . now the general joy seemed cruel to her: she stood aloof from that common life."[17] The result of this suffering, of this separation from the common life of Florence, is action on Romola's part; she decides to flee and find a place for herself elsewhere. Her flight, however, is arrested by the historical figure Savonarola who convinces her that in her suffering lies a certain kind of strength and, more importantly, a form of agency:

> And now, when the sword has pierced your soul, you say, 'I will go away; I cannot bear my sorrow.' And you think nothing of the sorrow and the wrong that are within the walls of the city where you dwell: you would leave your place empty, when it ought to be filled with your pity and your labor. If there is wickedness in the streets, your steps should shine with the light of purity; if there is a cry of anguish, you, my daughter, because you know the meaning of the cry, should be there to still it.[18]

Romola's own suffering, according to Savonarola, provides her with a possible connection to the sorrows of Florence and it ultimately authorizes and demands her action within the city. Whereas before she had seen her brother's religion as a "groveling superstition,"[19] Romola, through the words of Savonarola, partly accepts his conception of the world, abandoning the joy which refuses to acknowledge pain. Again the crucifix becomes the central symbol: "Conform your life to that image, my daughter; make your sorrow an offering."[20]

Welcoming this role which combines her brother's emphasis on sorrow with a purpose that pulls one into the world instead of away from it,

Romola becomes a central figure in the daily scenes of Florence:

> As usual, sweet womanly forms, with the refined air and carriage of the wellborn, but in the plainest garb, were moving about the streets on their daily errands of tending the sick and relieving the hungry. One of these forms was easily distinguishable as Romola de Bardi.[21]

Not only a figure of maternal comfort, as many critics have argued, Romola is also one of command. Her selfless devotion provides a moral strength that is respected by all who encounter her. Her actions stand as a direct form of participation in the historical struggle of Florence against the Papacy, the French King, and the other city states of the Italian peninsula. In fact, it is the moral power of her position that allows her to disrupt her husband's scheme to deliver Savonarola to his enemies. Forced by Romola to account for Savonarola's safety in public, we are told that Tito felt "completely helpless before this woman . . . . Romola had an energy of her own which thwarted his."[22] Not present when Tito had sold her father's library, Romola's energy is definitively presented as a product of her suffering.

In transforming Romola into a historical agent through her suffering, Eliot is clearly invoking her predecessor in the genre of historical fiction, Sir Walter Scott. As a result of his central and founding position in the tradition of the historical novel, Scott is often seen as a key figure in the progressive and national narratives that excluded women as historical agents. In part, this characterization is accurate. In telling the history of England and Scotland from the Middle Ages to the beginning of the eighteenth century, in giving a continuous history of the birth of the modern imperial British nation, Scott affirmed his belief in nineteenth-century narratives of historical progress.

However, there is another dimension to the imaginative recreation of the past found in his work. Scott's second novel, *Guy Mannering*, provides a clue to this aspect of his historical vision. The opening of the narrative presents a familiar and often repeated formula: an English protagonist journeying through the liminal landscape of Scotland, his gaze transversing the border between the past and the present. In this particular moment, the temporal boundary is found in the contrast between the late eighteenth-century mansion of the Laird of Ellangowan and the adjacent ruins of his ancestors' castle:

> He now perceived that the ruins of Ellangowan castle were situated upon a promontory, or projection of rock, which formed one side of a small and placid bay on the sea-shore. The modern mansion was placed lower,

> though closely adjoining, and the ground behind it descended to the sea by a small swelling green bank, divided into levels by natural terraces, on which grew some old trees, and terminating upon the white sand.[23]

In this moment of description one is presented with the central themes that Scott's historical fiction will continue to engage over the next fifteen years. The ruined castle and the modern mansion provide a striking visual presentation of Scott's conception of historical transition. In effect, an antiquarian relic provides a concise vision of the historical transition from a world of feudal obligations and bonds to the modern nation state's dependence upon the middle class.

Yet following an impulse of romantic sympathy, Mannering moves within the ruined castle and reveals an aspect of Scott's historical imagination which stands outside this narrative of national and historical progress. Mannering finds

> The gypsy he had seen on the preceding evening . . . . [He] could not help feeling that her figure, her employment and her situation, conveyed the exact impression of an ancient sibyl . . . . Equipt in a habit which mingled the national dress of the Scottish common people with something of an Eastern costume, she spun a thread, drawn from the wool of three different colors – black, white, and gray – by assistance of those ancient implements of housewifery, now almost banished from the land, the distaff and spindle.[24]

Meg Merrilies, the gypsy that Mannering looks upon, is the first of many similar figures in Scott's fiction; in fact, later manifestations of this type were often criticized by contemporary reviewers as simple repetitions of the initial creation. Like the castle she inhabits, Meg is ancient; she is the representative of a past age. However, unlike the castle which prompts and allows for the working of Mannering's romantic imagination, Meg is a living remnant of the past, one that can directly affect the present. Her ability to influence the plot is central to the restoration of Lucy and Harry Bertram as the rightful heirs of Ellangowan. Yet even as she represents a Scottish past and works to return it, she is also a gypsy, an eastern figure of romance, a wanderer without a homeland, crossing national, historical, and gender boundaries ("and in all points . . . [she] seemed rather masculine than feminine").[25] In addition, however, she is marked by a traumatic suffering that has shattered her sanity (a result of her participation in the kidnapping of Harry Bertram as a child). Existing on the margins of any traditional historical account, but absolutely essential to the plots of the novels they inhabit, such romantic figures of suffering represent what Kathryn Sutherland has defined as the Waverley Novel's

"unreadable core, . . . [a collection of] social outcasts, gypsies, . . . and madwomen."[26] Marked with the individual suffering brought about by the movement of history, and retaining, despite their marginal status and link to the past, an uncanny ability to influence the present, the figures that make up the unreadable core of Scott's fiction, through their very presence, represent those aspects of history that are not accounted for in progressive and national historical discourses.[27] They are, as Scott envisions them, both a testament to the suffering associated with historical change and a central force in any narrative's forward movement.

It is after a second moment of suffering, the death of her godfather, Bernardo del Nero, at the hands of the Florentine government, a death both her husband and Savonarola are partly responsible for, that Romola again decides to abandon the city. Setting herself adrift in a small boat on the Mediterranean, Romola deliberately imitates Boccaccio's romantic tale of Gostanza.[28] It is this scene and its aftereffects, more than any other, which have contributed to the critical disregard the novel has faced in the past. Romola's emergence from the Mediterranean ocean at a plague stricken town where she will ultimately recover her sense of purpose has been read as an abandonment of realism for romance and the point at which the novel and Romola, herself, lose any claim to historical probability.[29] Yet, Eliot is obviously conscious of the romantic turn of her narrative, the explicit reference to Gostanza makes this clear, as does Romola's sense that she is returning to the dreams of her "early girlhood."[30]

Maitzen, also noticing the deliberate nature of Eliot's turn to romance, argues that this transformation is meant to highlight the failure of contemporary historical accounts regarding women. Such accounts posited an idealized model of a woman's character, an a-historical or trans-historical definition of the feminine that held little relation to specific historical experiences. According to Maitzen, Eliot's goal is to demonstrate that

> as long as essentializing myths constructed women as a-historical beings detached from their context, women would continue to be misfits, out of place in historical representation as Romola is out of place in her novel. And until such a transformation wrote women into history, historiography would continue to be partial, inadequate, and, in its own way, mythical.[31]

In other words, Eliot's novel becomes an elaborate critique or parody of the a-historical woman found in so many of her contemporaries' historical accounts.

Romola's presence in this village is, as the narrator indicates, transformed into a romantic legend "of a blessed lady who came over the