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## Economic Women

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## Sacrificial Value

BEYOND THE CASH NEXUS IN  
GEORGE ELIOT'S *ROMOLA*



ILANA M. BLUMBERG

In the early years of the decade that offered George Eliot her highest selling price for fiction, misers and thieves became central figures in her work. Silas Marner, Brother Jacob, and the lesser-known figures of Bardo and Tito in her 1862 Italian romance, *Romola*, all bear troubled relations to wealth. Economics and ethics are inseparable in these portraits, since these characters are also described as needing the education in sympathy that Eliot famously saw her novels as providing. I want to suggest that in the 1860s, economics functioned for Eliot not merely as a convenient metaphor for ethics but as a personal and historically rooted challenge to her avowed ethics of free-flowing sympathy among mutually responsible human beings. As Eliot continued to collect royalties on *Silas Marner*, her best-selling fable of a miser and his gold; as she negotiated with George Smith, who had offered her £10,000 for serial publication of *Romola* in the *Cornhill*, an offer Eliot believed to be “handsomer than almost any terms ever offered to a writer of Fiction”; and as she came to recognize the commercial failure of that project and, in response, to offer Smith the gift of her short story “Brother Jacob,” the tale of a faithless son who robs his mother of her small, private savings, Eliot’s fiction enacted and reflected

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I am grateful for the influences of Linda C. Dowling and Peter Stallybrass on this essay.

on questions shared by other major novelists and political economists of her day.<sup>1</sup> What sort of economic exchange might be productive of ethical human relations? What forms of wealth might be best suited to escape the risks of unethical possession or circulation? And, even more significantly, how might capable women become the ethical agents of such exchanges rather than their objects? Describing the intensive labors that attended her composition of *Romola*, Eliot said that she had written it "with [her] best blood."<sup>2</sup> It was this notion of sacrificial exchange that enabled Eliot to merge the private aims of literary entrepreneurship with the public aims of social sympathy and to imagine an ethical economics in the early 1860s.

*Romola*, Eliot's ambitious novel of the Italian Renaissance, was recognized by some of her more astute contemporary readers as a veiled meditation on the Victorian woman question.<sup>3</sup> Yet neither readers past nor readers present have noted how thoroughly the novel considers the related conjunction of ethics and economics in Victorian terms. In *Romola*, Eliot associated marketplace exchange and the characterless liquidity of money with the dangerously self-seeking tendencies of utilitarianism and the worst abuses of the cash nexus; the province of this high-stakes marketplace is exclusively male. Meanwhile, the novel establishes its alternative to the marketplace in the space of the private library, another male domain. In this space, the aim to retain private property beyond circulation and to calculate value not as a function of exchange but by purely individual standards results in an equally self-concerned, antisocial ethic and economic practice. These two alternatives pose special threats to women, who run the risks of becoming either objects of exchange or prized private property that loses rather than gains value in retention. Against these troubling alternatives, Eliot offered sacrifice as a female form of exchange that could embrace the inevitably transformative power of the marketplace while refusing the moral fungibility it had previously threatened.

If sacrifice tends to evoke the self-lacerating and inhibiting forms of repression we have been used to associate with Victorian female experience, I use it here in a more particular sense. As the sociologist Georg Simmel defines it, sacrifice is the exchange of one precious value for a second equal

<sup>1</sup> George Eliot, *Letters of George Eliot*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols. (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1954–78), 4:34–35.

<sup>2</sup> As quoted in Andrew Sanders, Introduction to *Romola*, by George Eliot (London and New York: Penguin, 1980), 7–31, 10.

<sup>3</sup> The *Westminster Review's* anonymous reviewer of 1863 stated, "We cannot but think . . . that this long and elaborate disquisition on the relations between the sexes as a moral question is set forth by George Eliot too much in the colours of the nineteenth century." See Anonymous, "Unsigned Review, *Westminster Review*," October 1863, lxxx, 344–52 in *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Carroll (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), 213–20, 216.

or greater value: “the value that a subject sacrifices can never be greater, in the particular circumstances of the moment, than the value that he receives in return.”<sup>4</sup> Paradoxically similar to self-interested exchange, then, sacrificial exchange also seeks its end in a surplus of value, rather than the sheer loss that at first seems to define it. Painful loss is a requisite of sacrifice, yet when we consider the results of sacrifice as much as the process, we can see that the loss functions to heighten the potential value of its replacement. In *Romola*, the surplus generated by sacrificial exchange is not just personal female agency but also a transformation “upward” in forms of value. Not all forms of value are equal, Eliot suggests, not even values that come to seem commensurate because they can be exchanged for one another. In *Romola*, when a capable woman becomes an agent of exchange, dead or desiccated forms of value are exchanged for life-giving and nourishing forms of value in a sort of “trading up” that mirrors the evolution of social relations Eliot hoped to encourage with her novels of sympathy. As we will see, the heroine Romola, betrayed by her husband, Tito, redeems the money realized from his treacherous sale of her late father Bardo’s library, amassed and tended over a lifetime and planned as a bequest to the city of Florence. Romola uses this money to attend to yet another betrayal of Tito’s, as she feeds the vulnerable bodies of Tito’s extralegal wife and illegitimate children. In so doing, she realizes a kind of surplus value we might call sacrificial. Sacrificial value dissolves the lines between self and other that have previously divided ethical from economic practice. In short, sacrificial exchange transforms private value into more collective forms in a fashion particularly appealing to Victorian thinkers intent on ideals of wide, yet effective, human sympathy. As Eliot narrated her way to an ethically viable, female form of commercial and textual exchange, she cannily took advantage of the immense cultural authority and personal meaning located in the mid-Victorian ideal of sacrifice, even as she radically transformed its meaning. Sacrificial exchange, predicated on loss and renunciation, realized its profits as it shared them.

### I. HOARDING AND EGOISM: ROMOLA IN THE LIBRARY

At the outset of Eliot’s historical novel, the narrator asserts that while politics, scholarship, and trade have changed dramatically since the high

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<sup>4</sup> Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 87. For an extensive discussion of the objective and subjective dimensions of value, see Simmel, “Value and Money,” 59–130.

Renaissance, men "still own *that* life to be the highest, which is a conscious voluntary sacrifice."<sup>5</sup> Yet beyond the poetry of the Proem, *Romola* is strikingly short on conscious voluntary sacrifice. In fact, it seems all concentrated into one character, Romola herself. When the novel opens, we first encounter Romola as the dutiful Miltonic daughter, sequestered in a dim library, where she aids Bardo de' Bardi, her blind, moneyless father, in his Casaubon-like exertions on the rare manuscripts he has spent his lifetime collecting, copying, and emending. Disappointed in his passionate scholarly ambitions by the loss of his son's assistance (Dino has converted to a life of monastic Christianity among the Franciscans), Bardo dedicates himself to protecting the library and collection of antiquities from claims and debt, and wishes to bequeath it in its integrity to the city of Florence as "an everlasting possession to my fellow-citizens" (53).

Yet Bardo's desire, noble as it may sound, also reflects his need "to leave a lasting track of his footprints on the fast-whirling earth" (46). Like his Bardi ancestors before him, Romola's father possesses the "old family pride and energy, the old love of pre-eminence" (53). Bardo may eschew the "vulgar pursuit of wealth in commerce," but his own ascetic life and his devotion to "collecting the precious remains of ancient art and wisdom" are their own vulgar pursuit; Bardo's self-importance occludes his understanding of the lessons offered by the ancient art and wisdom (53). Though stoical teachings of worldly renunciation pepper Bardo's speech, the narrator describes these as "lip-born maxims . . . powerless over the passion which had been moving him" (56). Bardo cannot forget what the world owes him: "I have a right to be remembered," Bardo proclaims (55):

"I claim my right: it is not fair that the work of my brain and my hands should not be a monument to me—it is not just that my labour should bear the name of another man. It is but little to ask," the old man went on, bitterly, "that my name should be over the door—that men should own themselves debtors to the Bardi library in Florence." (57)

Bardo fears the theft of credit and memory, and rejects the single most likely avenue for preserving his work—printing—a marvel of modernity that Bardo laments but the narrator celebrates: "the first sheets of that fine Homer which was among the early glories of the Florentine press" (7). Bardo's fear that some other scholar will claim the credit for his work has prevented him from yielding to "the wish of Aldo Manuzio when he sets up his press at Venice, and giv[ing] him the aid of my annotated manu-

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<sup>5</sup> George Eliot, *Romola* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon-Oxford Press, 1993), 9.

scripts” (55). The pathos of Bardo’s situation is that his work is likely to be remembered *only* if he lends the printers his manuscripts. Bardo’s retention of his own manuscripts and his refusal to share any of his emendations guarantee that his insights will be buried in an unmarked grave.

Remarkably, Eliot tethers Bardo’s rejection of print technology not so much to his historically limited perspective but to his culpable egoism, especially noxious because it operates in a sphere where it least belongs, a sphere dedicated to the production of knowledge. Bardo has zealously hoarded what he owns, all the while insensitive to its teachings and even to his own avowed commitment to provide a “far-stretching, lasting light which spreads over centuries of thought, and the life of nations, and makes clear to us the minds of the immortals who have reaped the great harvest and left us to glean in their furrows” (51). Yet, like light, earth, and recurring natural cycles, what Bardo has collected is not his alone; what he has emended, he has not himself written. The library has mistakenly come to reflect the man more than its contents. The objects have become “a scenario of the personal,” as Susan Stewart puts it in her description of collecting: “The ultimate term in the series that marks the collection is the ‘self,’ the articulation of the collector’s own identity” (162).<sup>6</sup>

Bardo describes the risk to his intellectual property in the most material of terms, appropriately reflecting the coincidence of material and intellectual possession in manuscript culture.<sup>7</sup> His inability to separate knowledge from its material form and its memorial function opposed Eliot’s own typically Victorian ideal of the transgenerational, shared pursuit of knowledge in which individual contributions were imagined to be subsumed by a collectively owned, abstract product. John Ruskin, sharing Eliot’s sense of the ongoing life of the dead in the quest for wisdom, described the project of inheritance and bequest as “exchange [ . . . ] between the living and the dead”:

We, as we live and work, are always to be thinking of those who are to come after us; that what we do may be serviceable, as far as we can make it so,

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<sup>6</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> In what was soon to be his classic account, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), Jacob Burckhardt had contextualized the term “fame,” emphasizing that its Renaissance associations were intensely material. The markings of fame included an honored gravesite, perhaps a preserved birthplace, home, or library. See Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860; New York: Modern Library—Random House, 1995), 108–15. Local competition over such monuments makes it even clearer that fame was rooted in singular objects and specific locations.

to them, as well as to us. Then, when we die, it is the work of those who come after us to accept this work of ours with thanks and remembrance, not thrusting it aside or tearing it down the moment they think they have no use for it. And each generation will only be happy or powerful to the pitch that it ought to be, in fulfilling these two duties to the Past and the Future. . . . Its own possessions will never be enough for it, unless it avails itself gratefully and tenderly of the treasures and the wisdom bequeathed to it by its ancestors.<sup>8</sup>

For Eliot and Ruskin, such collective knowledge could not be conceived apart from the dominant value of sympathy and the altruistic ethic that they imagined superseding egoism. Human sympathy, fellow-feeling on both its vertical and horizontal axes, was their corrective for corrupt individual ambition and their safeguard for a vivifying collective knowledge.

In the case of *Romola*, Bardo resembles most of the other important male figures in the novel who lack the "human sympathies which are the very life and substance of our wisdom" (164).

## II. CIRCULATION AND EGOISM: ROMOLA IN THE MARKETPLACE

Eliot links both Bardo's refusal to share his manuscripts with printers and his insistence on their memorial value to his underappreciation of Romola, the one object in his library that is not "lifeless," but a living treasure (54). Like the inanimate objects and hoarded manuscripts of the library, Romola does not circulate beyond the confines her father sets for her. She is entirely unaware of the world beyond her father's library. The novel brilliantly dramatizes the unsympathetic, male alternatives of utter hoarding or undifferentiated circulation as they converge tragically upon Romola, who is transformed in the early pages of the novel from hoarded object to an object of trade between two men. Bardo's ethos of hoarding and retention yields to the unrelenting pressures of trade and circulation when Tito Melema appears in Bardo's library fresh from the rush of the Florentine marketplace. Tito needs money and is eager either to trade upon his scholarly services or to sell precious gems that were gifts from his adoptive father, Baldassarre. Tito's decision to sell the gems represents the son's callousness toward the aging father who generously adopted him years ear-

<sup>8</sup> John Ruskin, *A Joy Forever* [1857], *Complete Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 19 (New York: Bryan, Taylor and Company, 1894), 181–82.

lier. The sale is callous not only because of the sentimental value of the rings, but because Tito sells them for his own profit rather than to finance a search to redeem Baldassarre, who was reputedly taken captive by Turks. Tito knows what is expected of him by “Public opinion”—to “make sacrifices, take voyages again and again” (98)—yet Tito asks himself, “Do I not owe something to myself?” (100). Tito, it seems, will sell anything—even his father—if it serves his personal advantage; he is “equal to any sacrifice that was not unpleasant” (281).

Not surprisingly, in this scene where the ethos of profit-oriented exchange rules the day, Romola too becomes reconstituted in the novel’s gaze as a commodity. As Jeff Nunokawa claims, Victorian novelists wrote within a new economy that threatened to commodify and alienate even what was imagined to be sacred and inalienable. Responding to such cultural anxieties, novelists often represented women as “feminine treasure[s] that elude[d] the vicissitudes of capital.”<sup>9</sup> Yet like all “inalienable” treasures, women, too, were finally alienable. The marriage market was one exceptionally important form of such daughterly alienability, with its financial proceeds and losses accruing largely to men, while affecting women’s lives profoundly. Romola, with her golden hair, “a rare gem of [Bardo’s] own” (74), is precisely that feminine treasure which at first seems to have no price, but soon enough is sold. It is no coincidence that Romola’s dowry, along with the debts that might preclude the bequest of the family library, comes to interrupt her father’s reverie over the spiritual estate he seeks to leave to Florence. For Bardo, Romola is associated with material demands, trivial and base, and yet ever pressing, and he chooses her circulation as the means for preserving his library, abdicating his responsibilities as her father to investigate the stranger who seeks her hand. After a short courtship between Romola and Tito, characterized by the mutual delusion so common to Eliot’s courtships, Tito accepts Romola without a dowry (the price he pays for being a stranger with no leverage to make claims), and the two marry.

Tito is the novel’s most complex figure, embodying a market culture’s dominant value of circulation, with all its ethical risks, yet at the same time, with significant social possibilities. As the sale of his father’s rings reflects, he is an unforgivable egoist. Yet solely by virtue of his entrance into the novel and his deeply unethical exchanges—his thefts and sales—does Romola find her way out of the confining space of her father’s library toward an ethical understanding and practice beyond her own unques-

<sup>9</sup> Jeff Nunokawa, *The Afterlife of Property: Domestic Security and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 13.

tioned, fierce sense of loyalty to family and the past. Soon after Tito marries Romola, Bardo dies disappointed, having come to see that Tito will not replace his lost son by devoting himself to Bardo's scholarship. On the heels of Bardo's death, Romola, troubled by guilty fears that she pursued her own happiness before her father's, becomes consumed with fulfilling Bardo's dying wish to bequeath his library to the city. Even as Romola works to secure the library from Bardo's debts, Tito enters into his own negotiations to divide it and sell its components to French and Milanese bidders. Having learned that Baldassarre is in Florence, having denied the relationship and the man to secure his own comfort and reputation, and imagining, in consequence, that he might have to leave Florence, Tito seeks the funds to do so in comfort. Without any advance warning to Romola, Tito sells the library for three thousand florins, dismissing Romola's piety to the dead as "sentimental scruples which . . . had no relation to solid utility" and which needlessly "deprived himself and Romola of substantial advantages" (280). Eliot's forceful association of Tito with her own contemporary utilitarianism was unambiguously negative. Tito's convenient respect for utility entails his dismissal of any sympathetic or altruistic relations, especially those that might require self-sacrifice.<sup>10</sup>

In selling the library, Tito asserts himself against the wishes of his deceased father-in-law and takes advantage of his legally and physically defenseless wife, going so far as to lock her in when she seeks to leave the house to reverse the sale. As the novel's spokesman on behalf of circulation (as engineered by men), Tito provides a full and articulate, if terribly flawed, countertheory to the novel's praise for Romola's pious, retentive aims. Tito responds to Romola's need to "keep our silent promises on which others build because they believe in our love and truth" with an argument for wider sympathies (289–90):

the notion of isolating a collection of books and antiquities, and attaching a single name to them for ever, was one that had no valid, substantial good for its object: and yet more, one that was liable to be defeated in a thousand ways. See what has become of the Medici collections! And, for my part, I consider it even blameworthy to entertain those petty views of appropriation: why should anyone be reasonably glad that Florence should possess the benefits of learned research and taste more than any other city? . . . what possible good can these books and antiquities do, stowed

<sup>10</sup> Eliot's treatment of utilitarianism is markedly negative, especially given its more sophisticated explications by the early 1860s. See J. B. Schneewind, *Sidgwick's Ethics and Victorian Moral Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 139.

together under your father's name in Florence, more than they would do if they were divided or carried elsewhere? Nay, is not the dispersion of such things in hands that know how to value them, one means of extending their usefulness? The rivalry of Italian cities is very petty and illiberal. The loss of Constantinople was the gain of the whole civilized world. (288–89)

In this passage, Eliot marshals her full arsenal of historical knowledge against a chronologically handicapped Tito. From her reading and her Italian journeys, she knew that the private collections of citizens, painstakingly built and retained against threats of debt, war, famine, and flood, were to form the core of invaluable, public Italian libraries. As Burckhardt noted in 1860, the “celebrated Medici library,” which Tito takes here as his example of vain and useless collection, “had to be recovered piecemeal” after the plundering in 1494; it then became the foundation of Florence’s public Uffizi galleries.<sup>11</sup> Yet ethical implications overshadow the historical ones. Tito’s speech, with the hyperarticulate, sophisticated arguments whose processes of self-convincing so interested Eliot, is easily seen through by Romola. Instinctively recoiling from Tito’s self-justifications, Romola condemns his “hopelessly shallow readiness which professed to appropriate the widest sympathies and had no pulse for the nearest” (289).

### III. SACRIFICIAL EXCHANGE: ROMOLA AND THE EDIBLE SCROLLS

Yet Tito’s critique of “those petty views of appropriation”—the avowed preferential loyalty to city, nation-state, and family—sets in relief the narrowness of Romola’s own sympathies, which barely extend beyond her father. Likewise, Tito’s political engagement, unethical as it is (he is a double agent), allows us to see more vividly Romola’s lack of interest in just those public concerns that will shape her future along with those of her fellow Florentines. The sale of the library marks a turning point in the novel. It occasions Romola’s attempt to leave Tito, her passage beyond the walls of her home, and her subsequent life-changing meeting with Savonarola, who teaches her to accept the bonds of “simple human fellowship” rather

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<sup>11</sup> Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 142. Influenced by Michelet and then Burckhardt, the dominant position of nineteenth-century historians was that the “rivalry” scorned by Tito had been responsible for spurring the great productions of the Renaissance. The division of materials was, contrary to Tito’s claims, not at all useful to scholars who needed to do comparative work.

than those of her nearest affections alone (361). It is Savonarola who challenges Romola's assumption that "wide sympathies" must be Tito's shallow or false sympathies, erected as a defense against the real claims of those nearby.

As Romola attempts to flee her marriage and her city, Savonarola confronts her in language that is unusually suited to cast Romola into doubt but also to recall to the reader the ethical misapprehensions of both Bardo and Tito. Savonarola demands of Romola, "Who is so base as the debtor that thinks himself free?" (361) and tells her she cannot abandon her city in its time of need since she bears to others the "debt of a fellow-citizen" (363). While Tito and Bardo imagine the debts others owe them—pride, fame, pleasure, ease—and hoard, steal, and sell accordingly, Romola is asked to imagine an inverted ethical paradigm. Given the conjunction of ethics and economics in the novel, the inverted ethical paradigm Romola must imagine demands an economic correlative as well: What sort of exchange relation might match an ethical position that imagines oneself in debt to others who are not one's family but are also not sheer strangers? What sort of exchange relation would enact an authentic and appropriately measured sympathy? As we will see in the final pages of this essay, *Romola* dramatizes ethical exchange as the willingness to sacrifice one's own capital so that it anonymously supports transgenerational and extrafamilial beneficiaries; such exchange expresses the conviction that the future of humanity supersedes any one individual's claims. In establishing this model of self-sacrifice, Eliot reflects on writing, her chosen career, as a model site for sacrificial relations.

The central object of sacrifice in *Romola* is the library. After a complicated series of political and personal events, Tito meets his retribution, dying at his adoptive father's hand. Romola, inheriting his property, and "distrust[ing] the cleanness of that money," makes the funds over to the State, "except so much as was equal to the price of her father's library" (572). With this particular, consecrated sum, Romola sets out to find Tito's second family, whom she vows to support with the library money. The designation of the library's purchase money to feed and shelter Romola's rival offers an alternative to indiscriminate exchange and hoarding as expressions of greed, egoism, and private aggrandizement. Redressing her father's failures, Romola gives up her own wealth and forgoes any personal renown: "a more noble sensitiveness made her shrink from assuming an attitude of generosity in the eyes of others by publishing Tessa's relation to Tito" (571).

Further, Romola does not invest her money in enduring material possessions such as bronze and marble fragments or the parchment manu-

scripts that, when cared for correctly, could last over a thousand years in perfect condition. Romola does not invest at all. Instead, she buys food, the least staying of all commodities. Where Bardo desires to leave a mark, Romola buys what will assuredly leave no mark but instead will find itself incorporated into the bodies for which she cares, bodies which themselves will yield to future generations, a theme Eliot makes central to her historical novel. If the telos of print is memory and survival, the telos of food is incorporation and absorption. While Bardo depended on writing to leave what Stewart has called “a trace beyond the life of the body,” to promise “the immortality of the material world in contrast to the mortality of the body” (31), Romola turns to food, which, as Peter Stallybrass writes, “rapidly *becomes* us and disappears.”<sup>12</sup> That Eliot turns the exchange money of the library into the provision of nourishing food makes especially good sense since her novel has also developed the scriptural metaphor of knowledge truly acquired as something ingested and absorbed.<sup>13</sup> Romola’s absorption of the humanist wisdom of sympathy enables her to share rather than hoard her wealth.

Romola’s exchange of the library money for food also redresses Tito’s failures. Where his easy exchanges have destroyed human links and denied the claims of the past, Romola’s exchanges create new ties that uphold human obligations, particularly those the strong owe to the weak. Circulation here accepts the original debts of human sympathy that Romola’s father and husband never acknowledged and does so in an excessive sacrificial mode that cannot be explained or circumscribed by Tito’s utilitarian political economy. As Romola later explains to Tito’s pleasure-loving young son, ethical life characterized by “this sort of happiness often brings so much pain with it, that we can only tell it from pain by its being what we would choose before anything else, because our souls see it is good” (587).

In adopting Tito’s family, Romola also resolves the novel’s problem of competing sympathies. Strangers, Tessa and the children are objects of Romola’s “wide sympathy”; yet since they are linked to Romola through Tito, the second wife and children are simultaneously objects of “near sympathy.” Adoption allows Eliot to trace this moderate path of sympathy, in which the fierce animal attachments for which Savonarola early on criti-

<sup>12</sup> Peter Stallybrass, “Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning, and the Life of Things,” *Yale Review* 81.2 (1993): 35–50, 37.

<sup>13</sup> In contrast with Bardo’s “lip-born maxims,” Eliot imagines scrolls that require eating in order to nourish humanity. When Dino narrates an apocalyptic vision of the hunger and thirst left by inedible scrolls, Eliot implies a contrast with the prophecy of Ezekiel: “And He said to me, ‘Son of man, feed your stomach and fill your insides with this scroll which I give you,’ and I ate it and it became in my mouth as honey for sweetness” (Ezek. 2:5–3:3).

cizes Romola ("you are without a law, without religion: you are no better than a beast of the field when she is robbed of her young" [364]) merge with the undifferentiated "simple human fellowship" which the novel's late village scenes suggest do not suffice either.

#### IV. SACRIFICIAL EXCHANGE: ROMOLA AND "PUBLICATIONS IN PRINT"

Even as the character Romola exchanges the library's material value for the means of human sustenance, the author Eliot transforms the library as the novel's central image of literacy; in the process, Eliot offers us a model for an ethical economics especially relevant to women writers in the mid-nineteenth century. With the sale of the library, the novel moves from the past, the realm of "history," to a modernity continuous with Eliot's own times. In a striking shift, Eliot exchanges the novel's predominating images of singular and desiccated manuscripts and scrolls with a new image: multiple copies of printed publications. The monumental library thus yields not only to mortal, human bodies but also, in its imagistic "exchange-value" in the novel, to a new form of inexpensive, public literacy. At the political climax of the novel, handbills arguing for and against the death of so-called conspirators are sold and circulate, still wet, in the hands of "eager readers" (491–92), and Savonarola's confessions, in two editions, also pass into the hands of "eager readers" (575). In these scenes, contemporary social, political, and economic life becomes inseparable from print.

Romola's new, sympathetic interest in the life of her city is doubly represented in the novel by her feeding Tito's family (along with many of the poor and hungry) and her purchase and avid reading of the printed news, alongside many others in Florence. Her independent reading makes a dramatic break not only in her history of submission to male authority but also in the larger cultural history the novel traces. Like the nineteenth-century novel itself, the handbill could be purchased cheaply, shared by many readers, and read by nonscholars.<sup>14</sup> George Eliot responded ambivalently to the objects of mass literacy, noting in *Romola* the unreliability and sensationalism of handbills. In her own day, she worried that major

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<sup>14</sup> As Roger Chartier notes, in societies of the ancient regime, even those classed as "illiterate" may have been able to read signs, posters, news-sheets, or chapbooks. See *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 19.

advances in printing technology would degrade the intellectual climate.<sup>15</sup> Yet even as she alluded to the “spawn of the press,” she recognized the social possibilities of making print available to an unprecedentedly large audience.<sup>16</sup> In a letter of 25 June 1861, G. H. Lewes’s son, Thornton, noted to his father and stepmother that the “cheapest books ever published” had just been issued in London and simultaneously cheered the sale of 8,000 copies of *Silas Marner*, writing, “the more the merrier.”<sup>17</sup> Eliot’s own hope in the increased, cheap availability and circulation of printed forms was deeply connected to her belief in the efficacy of realist art to evoke social sympathy. While neither printed confessions nor handbills are a form of realist art, they are the texts in *Romola* that most closely approach the mass-circulating novel of the nineteenth century. Technologically closest in their shared distinction from manuscripts, the handbills and confessions resemble novels as well in the reading practice Eliot imagines them engendering in the heroine.

The link between sympathy and modern, mass forms of textuality is dramatized by *Romola*’s conscientious, discerning, and impassioned reading: an image of Eliot’s own artistic aims realized. The narrator stresses *Romola*’s attention not only to the bold headlines but to the “smaller type” of the handbills (491). Meanwhile, *Romola* attends to Savonarola’s published confessions with great care, repeatedly reading a “memorable passage, which may perhaps have had its erasures and interpolations” (578). Here, Eliot seems consciously to rework Bardo’s scribal relation to his manuscripts, his devoted search for any “error or indistinctness” and his specialized work to resolve it (50). Yet *Romola*’s reading differs from Bardo’s because she evaluates the document not in an intellectual exercise divorced from or repressive of personal experience. Instead, she applies her hard-earned understanding of human life and human voices, in all their tragic and sympathetic dimensions. *Romola* leaves behind the “lip-born maxims” of Bardo’s manuscripts to evaluate Savonarola’s transcript in light of what she knows of the extraordinary man himself: “Looking at the printed confessions, she saw many sentences . . . in striking opposition, not only to Savonarola, but also to the general tone of the confessions, [which] strengthened the impression that the rest of the text represented . . . what had really fallen from his lips” (578). At stake in *Romola*’s exemplary

<sup>15</sup> On the print revolution of the nineteenth century, in particular the transition from the printing press to printing machines, see Allan C. Dooley, *Author and Printer in Victorian England* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 79–83.

<sup>16</sup> George Eliot, *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, ed. A. S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 265.

<sup>17</sup> *Letters*, 8:286.

reading of this printed document is nothing less than the ethical validation of the novel's other tragic figure of sympathy and sacrifice: the martyr Savonarola himself.

## V. "PAINFUL JOY": ELIOT'S SACRIFICIAL PROFITS AND PROFITABLE SACRIFICES

Eliot's alignment of modern forms of textuality with sympathy, circulation, collective benefit, and female agency offers a satisfying novelistic resolution to the problems of the novel. Yet did it offer any meaningful practical lessons for developing an ethical economics in the mid-nineteenth century? As a professionalizing female writer, Eliot especially needed a way to reconcile sympathy with self-concern, collective profit with individual profit, and circulation with retention. In the balance were the risks to women when they functioned as objects rather than subjects of exchange. Texts became the special objects around which Eliot invented a female form of exchange that would allow for retention and circulation at the same time; that would allow for sacrificial activity, writing with one's "best blood," while vivifying the self; and that would trade upon an object close enough to the self to be a true offering, but distinct enough from the self to preserve an independent female agent of exchange.

As N. N. Feltes has demonstrated, one of the defining issues for professionalizing Victorian writers was whether they were to retain control over the "terms, conditions, and content" of their work or whether those rights were to remain largely in the hands of their publishers.<sup>18</sup> As a legal *feme sole*, in control of her own property as married women were not, George Eliot had as much to lose or gain from the relations of production under which her books were published as any male author. Like her contemporaries Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, for instance, she was involved in detailed negotiations over the price and format of her novels. Between *Romola* and *Middlemarch*, as Eliot's sense of her career began to coalesce, she was more and more willing to take the financial risks of her work upon herself in a royalty system rather than sell her books and their rights for a prearranged sum of money. No longer willing to engage in petty-commodity trade, Eliot came to relate to her novels less as "commodity-books," than as the "commodity-texts" of a capitalist culture, texts whose surplus value she sought to claim by altering the social relations of

<sup>18</sup> N. N. Feltes, *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 45.

their production.<sup>19</sup> The idea of royalties, of course, is dependent upon mass production and circulation. There are no royalties in a culture of singular manuscripts. Whatever profit an author makes comes from her capacity to give up her text to the public. And yet, this giving-up is not really a form of giving-up but of keeping-while-giving, the sort of sacrificial exchange along vertical and horizontal axes that Eliot took so much trouble to imagine against the alternative male models she described in *Romola*.<sup>20</sup>

What should we make of the fact that with all its sacrificial rhetoric *Romola* was a high watermark in Eliot's earning capacity? As a result of her decision to switch publishers in order to realize the extraordinary sum of £7,000 for *Romola*, Eliot was judged by her former and future publisher, John Blackwood, to be especially "mercenary."<sup>21</sup> Yet Rosemarie Bodenheimer has made the critical point that the money raised from the sale of Eliot's novels was not only the mainstay of Lewes and Eliot, but also went to supporting Eliot's stepchildren, the sons of G. H. and Agnes Lewes, and even, to some extent, the children Agnes bore with her lover, Thornton Hunt.<sup>22</sup>

A female writer should be no more obligated than a male to justify the money she makes for her work, yet it is remarkable that in publishing *Romola*, George Eliot acted out the part of her heroine, taking the equivalent of the "purchase-money" of her own precious text to support the second and even third family of the man she loved and lived with outside of legal marriage. Breaking down the lines between self and other, between kin and non-kin, and between personal and collective benefit, Eliot pursued profitable exchange without betraying her own ethical imperative. The salability of a precious text and then the fungibility of the money made from it became in her hands a very real mechanism for increasing and spreading value. Later, when George Eliot returned to reread *Romola*, the novel written with her "best blood," she described the "painful joy" of encountering her own sentences, now faded from her memory.<sup>23</sup> Eliot's "painful joy" of simultaneous possession, loss, and repossession defines for us the paradox of sacrificial value Eliot invented in *Romola*.

<sup>19</sup> Feltes, *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels*, 49.

<sup>20</sup> The phrase "keeping-while-giving" belongs to Annette Weiner, who uses it in an anthropological context rather than emphasizing its metaphorical and literary possibilities. Annette Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>21</sup> As quoted in Feltes, *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels*, 46.

<sup>22</sup> Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot, Her Letters and Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 286, n18.

<sup>23</sup> Sanders, Introduction to *Romola*, 10.