Masked Atheism

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

LaMonaca, Maria.
Masked Atheism: Catholicism and the Secular Victorian Home.
The Ohio State University Press, 2008.
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In 1854, Pope Pius IX declared the Immaculate Conception of Mary an essential component of Catholic dogma. This teaching, a binding article of belief for all Catholics, proclaimed that Christ’s mother was free from Original Sin from the moment of her conception. Victorian Protestants, already rankled by Catholic absurdities such as auricular confession, celibate religious life, and transubstantiation, were newly outraged by what they perceived as Rome’s virtual deification of a scripturally obscure woman. It was bad enough that Christ’s mother, through the machinations of Pius IX, should usurp the redemptive role of Christ in Christian theology. To make matters worse, she was simultaneously demonstrating, in reported apparitions throughout Europe, an exasperating habit of stirring up the masses and deflecting public devotion away from her Son. Of the most prominent nineteenth-century Marian apparitions (from Paris in 1830 to Knock, Ireland, in 1879), the Virgin’s purported 1846 apparition in La Salette, France, seems to have generated the most attention and public...
commentary in Victorian England. This apparition, according to Sandra Zimdars-Swartz, was “the first Marian apparition of modern times outside of a cloistered religious environment to attract widespread religious attention and to be officially ‘recognized’ by Roman Catholic authorities” (27). News of this unique “modern” apparition spread to England at the crux of anti-Catholic tensions. Victorian Protestant responses, both to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and to the apparition of La Salette, demonstrate how Mary, in John Singleton’s phrase, “was a powerful and evocative figure around whom the competing religious parties of Victorian Britain arrayed their forces” (16). In addition to questions of religious identity, the seemingly omnipotent figure of the Virgin Mary raised concerns about the transgressive potential of female sanctity. As Carol Engelhardt Herringer argues, the Virgin Mary “was not a widely accepted figure [in Victorian England], because she was not seen as a quiescent woman” (21). In a book titled *Our Lady of Victorian Feminism*, Kimberly Van Esveld Adams also depicts the Virgin Mary as a “contested symbol” (5) as well as an “empowering ideal” (52) for Victorian female intellectuals.

As Adams acknowledges in her study, however, not all scholars would be comfortable applying the modern term “feminist” to Victorian concepts of the Virgin Mary. I myself wish to sidestep the question altogether; this chapter will not speculate whether the Virgin Mary—as represented in the Victorian era or at any other period—can or should be called a “feminist” figure. Issues of gender, of course, are inextricable from the centuries-old cult of the Virgin Mary, and from her manifold representations in religious practice, art, and literature. But in the Victorian period, the Virgin Mary elicited more anxiety as an emblem of secularism, not feminism. European Catholics embraced Mary as a potential Redemptress from the rising tides of unbelief. According to John Singleton, “Catholics hoped and prayed that the Virgin”—in addition to her powers to cure the sick—“would prove to be equally effective in the struggle against republicanism, atheism, socialism, liberalism, and nationalism” (17). From the perspective of British Protestants, however, the Catholic Virgin Mary was the dread harbinger of a secular, godless universe. This sentiment emerges repeatedly in Victorian sermons, tracts, and other theological literature. Whereas Protestants recognized the scriptural Mary as a devout mother and wife, they regarded the Catholic Virgin Mary as a false goddess who rivaled—and even eclipsed—God and His Son in Catholic theology. Many devout Catholics believed that devotion to Mary would only bring them closer to God; Protestants, however, regarded Marian devotion as the perfect embodiment of “masked atheism”—paganistic practices veiled in false piety. Hence Mary could be *either* the way to salvation or the way to perdition, just as the tran-
substantiated host could be either Christ himself or profane “cannibalism.” The anxiety of discernment in these controversies was compounded by the fact that both demanded a suspension of the ordinary workings of the senses. Not only were Catholics to see God in an ordinary lump of bread, but they were also to believe that Mary could physically appear and disappear at will, in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Popular devotion to Mary and its effect on the gullible, uneducated masses is a central theme in George Eliot’s *Romola* (1862), and its plot bears some striking parallels to British commentary on the 1846 appari-
tation at La Salette. In December 1854, the *Times* published an article asserting that the “Virgin” of La Salette was none other than a mentally disturbed French nun who enjoyed playing dress-up:

Arrived at Grenoble, Mademoiselle Lamerlière went to a merchant to obtain some lace of a peculiar quality. [. . .] Before the merchant and his family the lady opened her bandbox, and its trousseau was too remarkable to have been easily forgotten. One by one she drew out the white robe, the yellow apron, the cross, the pincers, the hammer. All were filled with amazement at so eccentric a costume [. . .]. This was about the beginning of September. On the 19th the children of Salette gave a description of a lady whom they saw on the mountain, and her dress and ornaments exactly correspond with those which had excited the astonishment of the worthy citizens of Grenoble some days before. A singular coincidence! Was it the nun or the Virgin that affrighted the little prophets? or did the Virgin, fascinated with their peculiar elegance, send from Heaven to borrow the contents of the bandbox? (“The Heroine of La Salette,” *London Times*, 28 December 1854)

This assertion, of course, took for granted the stupidity of the young shepherds who saw her, as well as the craftiness of Catholic authorities who turned popular piety to their advantage. In *Romola*, whose heroine is at one point mistaken for the Virgin Mary by a simple peasant boy, devotion to the saints is also depicted as a way to manipulate and exploit others for selfish gain. As long as people persist in venerating the Madonna as a *Catholic* icon—in relation to God the Father and God the Son—they remain mentally enslaved by superstition and ignorance. The novel suggests, however, that the basis of Marian devotion—sensory observation and storytelling—can also serve to empower human beings as morally intelligent and self-sufficient agents. In *Romola*, this stage of human evolution is symbolized by the *secular* Madonna, the Madonna of anti-Catholic propaganda—the one whose very existence “kills” God.

Eliot’s work, unlike the other texts in this study, portrays domesticity in a *consistently* negative light. Nearly all her heroines, whether Dorothea Brooke, Maggie Tulliver, Dinah Morris, or Romola de Bardi, quickly discover that domestic life exacts on women tremendous moral and spiritual sacrifices. Indeed, characters such as the stupid and shallow Mrs. Tulliver—a Madonna turned “a little sour” (62) who falls apart when creditors claim her china and monogrammed tablecloths—even portray domesticity as the bane of female potential. And while Eliot’s novels champion female moral and spiritual integrity, these qualities are not dependent upon
Christianity. Conventional religious belief may provide Eliot heroines a temporary mode of self-assertion, but it is never a reliable or enduring one. Dorothea and Maggie turn away from religious reading and modes of expression (“I hardly ever pray anymore,” says Dorothea), whereas Dinah Morris reluctantly complies with her church’s ban on female preachers. *Romola*, Eliot’s Comtean allegory of human development, goes even further, to suggest that Romola can only reach her full spiritual potential in a fatherless and godless universe. Whereas other Victorian women writers drew upon Catholic and anti-Catholic discourse to condemn secularism, Eliot’s novel, infused with Catholic and anti-Catholic representations of the Madonna, alternately mourns and celebrates God’s death.

**The Immaculate Conception**

*Infallible Doctrine or Instrument of Satan?*

In his 1855 reply to Cardinal Wiseman’s Pastoral Letter on the Immaculate Conception, Protestant clergyman John Armstrong advises Catholic priests to take up Christian matrimony and fatherhood rather than “helping the poor old Pope to make a decree contrary to God’s Word, on the subject of human ‘conception,’ a subject not at all right [for unmarried priests] to be dwelling upon; and God alone knows the amount of gross iniquity which will be introduced into the world by sensual minds being directed towards it” (7). Victorians could not mention pregnancy in polite society, but the urgency of refuting Popish “HUMBUG” (10) sparked earnest public debate over how babies (Baby Mary, at least) were made. Whereas Protestants complained of the degree of power the Immaculate Conception conferred upon Mary, they were primarily motivated by fears of idolatry and atheism. If this dogma had concerned a male saint (Saint Peter, for example), Protestants would have been no less outraged; at issue was the establishment of a potential rival to the Holy Trinity, and implications that God and his Son were somehow lacking, in need of the supplementary grace and mercy of Mary. While Mary’s sex was not the primary issue in these debates, Protestant critics did find it useful when putting her back in her place. At one end of the spectrum, the historical Mary was portrayed as an ordinary woman given to meddling in her son’s affairs; at the other end, the Catholic, deified Mary was a demonic imposter and a female Lucifer. The Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception reinforced popular fears that Mary, not Christ, was the real focal point of worship for Catholics.
Three years before the pope’s proclamation, Rev. J. B. Lowe had argued that “the Romish system of religion ought assuredly not so much to be called by the name of Christianity as by that of Marianity” (The Worship of the Virgin Mary 6). The Pope’s new doctrine, then, seemed to be a frank admission of what Protestants had already suspected: Mary herself was a goddess. Now sermonizing in response to Pius IX, in 1855, Lowe argues that “this doctrine makes the Virgin independent of Christ. [...] from the very moment of her existence she is perfectly free from all sin, original and actual: she was never charged with any sin, and therefore never stood in need of forgiveness, or required a Saviour” (The Immaculate Conception 14). Indeed, why would the Virgin Mary, if already freed from Original Sin, need to bear the Christ Child at all? “Had she never been the mother of the Saviour,” argued Rev. T. Butler, “she was divine; she was, in fact, the author of Christianity—the first divine being that was born in human nature” (27). Lowe’s and Butler’s concerns are echoed in an 1855 sermon by Bishop Samuel Wilberforce, who argued that an immaculate Mary plays too prominent a role in the redemption of sinful humanity. This idea “directly shake[s] the great doctrine of the incarnation” (21), he insists, and “place[s] on the Mediator’s throne the Virgin mother instead of the incarnate Son” (22).

Protestant condemnations of the Immaculate Conception resonate with fear at the ease and frequency with which human beings create gods for themselves. These concerns gesture toward an even larger anxiety, that the Christian God might be similarly manmade. Rev. John Evans, in an 1852 sermon, describes Mariolatry as a symptom of “that innate depravity of the human heart” and adds that pagan mythology evinces “a strong predilection in favour of female deities” (14). A number of writers and preachers suggested that the authors of Scripture, anticipating human tendencies toward idol worship, deliberately withheld substantial information about Christ’s mother. Elizabeth Rundle Charles, in Mary, the Handmaid of the Lord (1854), states that “whilst we may affectionately gather and string together the few [scriptural] notices given us of Mary the mother of Jesus, it must not be forgotten that their very scarcity is among their most significant lessons” (iii). An uneasy awareness of the human capacity for idol worship, moreover, encouraged reflection upon the limited, human constructions of Christian theology. The oft-repeated concern—that a powerful Mary competed with or diminished God the Father—betrays a serious lack of confidence in how the latter was depicted and perceived in Scripture and Church tradition. Rev. Carus W. Wilson (the “black pillar” of Jane Eyre) observes how easily and arbitrarily the supernatural properties of Almighty God can be displaced elsewhere: “[I]f the Virgin can hear
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those prayers [of Catholics], and still more, has the power to extend any beneficial consequences [. . .] on behalf of the suppliants, she must be omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, ubiquitous—in fact, invested with the attributes of Deity” (1). Even worse, Mary-as-deity seemed far more attractive and accessible than orthodox Christian constructions of God the father. An anonymous tract of 1846, What Is Romanism? argues that Mariolatry,

[M]ake[s] the Almighty Himself an object of fear, and the Virgin an object of love; to invest Him, who is the Father of mercy and God of all comfort, with unapproachable majesty and awe, and with the terrors of eternal justice; and then, in direct and striking contrast, to array Mary with mercy, and benignity, and compassionate tenderness, and omnipotence in her love. (4)

In response to Mariolatry, Protestant writers such as Elizabeth Rundle Charles reminded readers of Mary’s “real” life as recorded in Scripture, as “the surest antidote to the adoration of Mary, Queen of heaven” (iii). Not content, however, to emphasize Mary’s simple life and her relatively small role in Christ’s ministry, some Protestants constructed Mary as a clingy, overinvolved mother who prompted Christ to demonstrate, repeatedly, that “He does not allow her to meddle” (Some Observations 12). As Charles Bird Smith argues in an 1849 sermon:

[. . .] Scripture reveals defects in Mary, as in all who partake of our fallen nature. In almost every case in which our Lord is introduced as speaking to her, there is a tone of rebuke,—intended, doubtless, to teach her and others, that the notion of maternal right (which has since been attached to her relation to him) was utterly inapplicable in her case. [. . .] Suffice it to say, that from the occasion, when, at twelve years of age, he rebuked her for venturing to remonstrate with him, on account of his staying behind in Jerusalem, up to the hour when he addressed her as he hung on the cross, he never once called her “mother.” This should be kept in mind as we proceed. (emphasis in original)

Smith, Charles, and other writers argue that Christ dissolved his filial attachment and obligations to his mother at the commencement of his ministry, an act that Mary, as Charles suggests, stoically accepted: “I suppose most of us have felt something of a chill, in spite of all the explanations of commentators, at the words, ‘Woman, what have I to do with
"Queen of Heaven" or Confused Nun?

—thee?'—severing with so keen an edge the ties of years. It is difficult not to imagine they must have fallen bitterly on the mother’s heart. Yet it does not seem that they did” (123). This defense (by a female author, no less) of Christ’s dismissal of his mother is extraordinary, considering Victorians’ veneration for motherhood in general. At least some Catholics found it shocking; Catholic priest Michael Tormey, in an 1855 essay on the Immaculate Conception, attacked Protestants’ “revolting proposition that the Son of God absolutely hated, or at least was indifferent about, His Mother” (227), “as if the filial duties ranked with the lowest class of relations known to mere animal life” (230).

Tormey labels this rhetorical strategy “unintelligible and unnatural” (230); surely, he would have been even more incensed by some Protestant inferences that Catholic representations of Mary had satanic dimensions. Walter Farquhar Hook accuses Catholics of translating “the most humble and holy Virgin into an idol of pride and vanity [. . .] a vain-glorious and aspiring creature like Lucifer” (qting. Bishop Bull in Mother of Our Lord 13). Bishop Christopher Wordsworth argues that through the decree of the Immaculate Conception, “Satan endeavours to use one of the most beautiful and blessed of all Creatures—the Virgin Mary—as an instrument to work our woe” (24). Even when not directly discussing the figure of Mary herself, anti-Mariolatry essays and sermons are especially likely to employ demonic female imagery to personify the Roman Catholic Church and its abuses. In an essay on The Origin and Progress of Mariolatry (1852), clergyman John Evans recounts Bishop Heber’s 1824 description of Catholic missionaries in India competing with Protestant evangelicals. Although the Roman Catholic party presents itself as a “spectre” of goodness and piety: “outstrip her in the race, but press her a little too closely, and she turns around on us with all the hideous features of envy and rage. Her hallowed taper blazes into a sulphurous torch, her hair bristles into serpents [. . .] and her words are words of blasphemy” (37). In an 1855 sermon on the Immaculate Conception, Bishop Samuel Wilberforce also compares Roman Catholicism to a fair female illusion, “with all her grossness veiled from you, and she herself transformed into an angel of light, [come] to work your downfall [. . .] read and weigh the warning graven by the finger of God upon her forehead [. . .] THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH” (32; caps in original). In these discussions, in which Mary as an arm of Satan easily shades into stereotypical representations of the Catholic Church as the Whore of Babylon, Victorian polarities of angelic mothers and demonic strumpets are eerily conflated. This frightening ambiguity echoes larger
anxieties about successfully distinguishing between true Christian piety and secular profanity.

Apparition at La Salette

*Call to Sanctity, or Argument for Atheism?*

On 19 September 1846, Françoise Melanie Matthieu, aged fifteen, and Peter Maximin Giraud, aged eleven, were watering their cattle outside the remote village of La Salette in the French Alps when they encountered a weeping woman in a very distinctive costume. According to an 1849 account of the event, published in England,

> It was the Queen of Heaven; but the children had no idea that it was so: they wished to fix their gaze on her, but could scarcely endure the sight of her dazzling beauty. They remarked, however, the diadem which glittered on her forehead, and which was surmounted by a lofty Asiatic head-dress. [...] A chain of gold, three fingers in width, descended to her waist; another little chain of gold held a crucifix, about eight inches in length, on one side of which were seen a pair of pincers, half open, and hanging down; and on the other a hammer,—symbols of the Passion of our Saviour, which seemed suspended without any support. (Villecourt 9)

Unlike later apparitions at Lourdes and at Fatima, in which the young seers reported multiple visits from the Virgin Mary, Melanie and Maximin described only one visit, in which the Lady, weeping constantly, delivered a straightforward message: reform or suffer the consequences. The Lady, who claimed to be “hold[ing] back” the arm of her Son’s wrath (10), complained of the neglect of religious observances: only elderly women attended Mass; people ate meat during Lent, neglected their prayers, and blasphemed freely. If people did not perform their religious duties, she warned, the crops would fail and young children would fall ill and die. After imparting to each child a “secret,” the Lady vanished. The story of the “Weeping Virgin of the Alps” spread quickly; pilgrims arrived, miraculous cures were reported. In 1851, on the fifth anniversary of the Virgin’s visit, the local Catholic bishop formally recognized the apparition, and La Salette continued to grow in popularity as a pilgrimage site.¹

1. In the twenty-first century, the apparition at La Salette is believed to be genuine by some groups of Catholics in France, the United States, and elsewhere. Today the shine and Basilica at La Salette is considered a “minor place of pilgrimage” (Sacred Destinations Travel Guide, [http://www.sacred-destinations.com/france/la-salette-shrine-of-our-lady.htm]), and at least
One reason that English Protestants felt so threatened by a French apparition is that it generated tremendous interest and excitement among English Roman Catholics. Despite the foreign locale and remoteness of La Salette, Birmingham priest Henry Formby exclaimed in an 1857 pamphlet on the apparition, “The voice of the heavenly turtle dove has, as we believe, been heard in our land. Accents falling from the sweet voice of her who stood by the Cross of Jesus [ . . . ] at length [ . . . ] have found their way to our ears” (4). In a skeptical age, here was (to believers at least) a clear manifestation of the divine, supernatural order of things, one documented by modern journalism. J. Spencer Northcote, a regular contributor to the Roman Catholic Rambler, exults that:

The thing [establishment of La Salette as a place of pilgrimage] has grown up in our own times, we might almost say under our own eyes; even the newspapers of the day, both English and foreign, have given publicity to the main outlines of the history from the very first, so that we have an opportunity of studying this rare phenomenon, the creation of a new sanctuary or place of pilgrimage, with the most minute exactness. (A Pilgrimage 13)

Such a direct sign from God had, in Northcote’s opinion, “a wonderful effect [ . . . ] on the moral and religious character of the people.” Northcote contrasts the present state of religious devotion in France to the “deplorable condition” it was in before the apparition: “But now the face of things is entirely changed; the voice of the blasphemer is silenced; the Sunday, not profaned by labour; the churches are frequented [ . . . ], and the Sacraments approached with reverence” (67). Bishop Ullathorne, who made a pilgrimage to La Salette in 1854 and appears to have been the most prominent English advocate for the validity of the apparition, regards the Virgin’s warning as a call to reverse the tide of secularism in England as well: “England is full of blasphemies, and what, before Heaven, is an English Sunday? What are the habits of our rude and ignorant poor? What their language? And what their life on Sundays? Does it stop here? Look at the late census and survey both town and country. The shops are closed and work ceases, but where are the great masses of people? Is it to God they give themselves? (The Holy Mountain 175).

While the apparition, for Ullathorne and other English Catholics, stood as a contradiction to modern secularism, Protestants complained that the absurd and unlikely nature of the apparition story was a mockery of

two shrines dedicated to La Salette have been built in the United States by the Missionaries of La Salette (established in 1852): one in Attleboro, MA, and another in Altamont, NY.
religion and a further inducement to atheism. In 1857, the *Edinburgh Review* published a review essay on books discussing the apparition, and joined the *Times* in insisting that the sham apparition was the contrivance of a deluded former nun, one Mlle Constance Lamérlière de St. Ferréol. The writer of the review also concurred with the *Times* in attributing the success and popularity of the apparition to the work of corrupt priests: “Can there be a greater offence in the eyes of God and man than a deliberate conspiracy to covert the vagaries of a half-witted nun into a divine revelation, to render this unfortunate wretch an object of worship, and to erect a temple to her on the scene of her performance?” (23). The writer implies that the incident has become so publicized and so far-fetched that it is now an embarrassment to Catholic authorities: “[T]hey found, like Frankenstein, they had given a shape to a monster which was too strong for them” (23). In the writer’s opinion, the apparition story will only encourage, not counteract, the spread of atheism: “Can there be a more formidable weapon in the hands of scepticism than this living contemporary proof of the avidity of people to swallow the grossest inventions?” (25). The debate, carried out in the British media between Protestants and Catholics over the validity of La Salette, reached absurd dimensions. Bishop Ullathorne, in his 1858 rebuttal to the *Edinburgh Review* essay, went so far as to insist that the ex-nun in question was too elderly and too obese to convincingly impersonate the Virgin Mary. He reports the impressions of a man who interviewed Mlle Constance: “Any one more unlikely to act with success the part of a celestial being I could not readily imagine” (Letters 33).

One might be struck by the fact that Ullathorne found the possibility of an elderly or overweight Virgin Mary more difficult to believe than the mere fact of her appearance in the French Alps in 1846. More to the point, however, the bizarre tone of the British debate over La Salette underscores the desperation many (Protestants and Catholics alike) felt in the face of seemingly irreversible trends toward secularism. As the apparition texts—along with documents on the Immaculate Conception—amply demonstrate, the figure of the Virgin Mary was a powerful emblem for the crisis of Victorian secularism, and this provides a better understanding of how and why George Eliot continually invokes the Virgin’s image in *Romola*. To consider Eliot’s Virgin solely as an image of female power only scratches the surface of so complex a symbol. An attention to British reports of the apparition at La Salette also highlights the fact that Eliot’s readers were familiar with the conventions of the Marian apparition narrative—recur
cent themes in apparition stories that appear to be, in Zimdars-Swartz’s words, central in attempts “to build comprehensive structures of meaning around apparitions and apparition messages” (251). *Romola* draws upon
multiple narrative traditions, superimposing the form of a novel upon
the older conventions of classical myth, epic, Christian hagiography, and
more recently, nineteenth-century Marian apparition narrative. Through
its combination of pagan and Christian narrative conventions, Eliot's novel
tells a history of human moral development that culminates, full circle, in
a sober embrace of secularism.

Romola as Hagiography

In the Triptych and the Cross, Felicia Bonaparte speculates that Eliot
chose to set Romola in the pre-Reformation era because “it was Roman
Catholicism [rather than Protestantism] that engaged her imagination
[. . . ] she understood that Roman Catholicism offered what no Protestant
faith could—authority and coherence—and what few Protestant faiths
do—mystery” (178). Based on her letters and journals, however, Eliot's
attitude toward Roman Catholicism seems to have been no less ambivalent
or conflicted than those of the other writers in this study. Like Brontë and
Barrett Browning, Eliot enjoyed the vicarious thrill of passing for Catholic
abroad, but was also outspoken in her criticisms of Romish superstition.
At the beginning of George Eliot's visit to Rome in 1860, she reports “being
taken up with seeing ceremonies, or rather with waiting for them”:

I knelt down to receive the Pope's blessing, remembering what Pius VII.
said to the soldier—that he would never be the worse for the blessing of an
old man. But altogether, these ceremonies are a melancholy, hollow busi-
ness, and we regret bitterly that the Holy Week has taken our time from
better things. I have a cold and headache this morning, and in other ways
am not conscious of improvement from the Pope's blessing. (Letters III:
288, 4–6 April 1860)

Of course, Eliot had even more reasons than Brontë and Barrett
Browning to condemn Catholicism. In a letter to Barbara Bodichon, Eliot
explains that while “I enjoy [religious forms and ceremonies] myself [. . . ]
I have faith in the working-out of higher possibilities than the Catholic
or any other church has presented [. . . ]. The highest “calling and elec-
tion” is to do without opium and live through all our pain with conscious,
clear-eyed endurance” (Letters III: 366, 26 December 1860; emphasis in
original). But Eliot's vision of a humanistic rather than religious worldview
perhaps rendered her all the more receptive to the Virgin Mary's potential
as an emblem of virtuous secularism. In *Romola*, moreover, Eliot demonstrates a fascination not only with the Madonna, but with the entire Catholic cult of the saints and the unique kind of narrative—hagiography—that evolved to educate and inspire the laity in regard to saints’ lives. In their respective works, Brontë and Barrett Browning each appropriate an element of Catholicism deemed morally objectionable by most Protestants (auricular confession and transubstantiation) and “reforms” it to suit their artistic goals. Eliot employs a similar tactic in *Romola*. As the novel depicts Romola’s evolution from a relative, dependent creature into a morally autonomous agent freed from the constraints of both fatherly and religious authority, it also sets up a binary between “sham” saints and manipulative hagiography, and “true” saints and ethically responsible storytelling.

In different ways in their respective works, Brontë, Barrett Browning, and Eliot all construct a fantasy of female moral agency unleashed from domestic confinement. Jane Eyre seems genuinely attracted to the idea of overseas missionary work *apart* from marriage to St. John Rivers; Aurora Leigh initially resists marriage to Romney, confident she can reform society solely through her role as artist; and in the sixty-seventh chapter of *Romola*, “Romola’s Waking,” the childless heroine finds herself cut off from both father and husband, free to risk her own life in caring for survivors of the plague. One might argue that the burgeoning agency of all three heroines is curtailed significantly by the conclusion of each narrative, whether through marriage (Jane and Aurora) or the adoption of children and other dependents (Romola). A major difference, however, is that while Jane and Aurora achieve both romantic and religious fulfillment by the ends of their stories, Romola’s *bildungsroman* terminates in a double-edged loss—she must survive without the “opium” of love, whether from a human father or lover, or that of an omnipotent, benevolent God.

Critics have complained of Romola’s passive, relatively powerless position in the novel’s epilogue, but my reading suggests that Eliot, by leaving her heroine in a state of emotional and theological deprivation, also places her in the best position to take up her highest moral calling: that of a hagiographer. Ironically, while Brontë and Barrett Browning’s works attempt to strike a balance between desire and duty for their heroines, it is the agnostic, Eliot, who in *Romola* resembles more overtly didactic writers (Fullerton and Sewell) in her fascination for morally enabling deprivation.  

2. Victorian diarist Henry Crabb Robinson made an explicit comparison between Eliot and Sewell after reading Eliot’s *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857). Disappointed by the book’s didactic tone, he declared that it would have given him more pleasure had it been written by “a regular Evangelical or pious High Church—Miss Sewell” (789–90).
final scene of the novel, Romola sustains their memory through performing ritual observances and, most important, weaving tales of their lives for the moral instruction of the next generation. While Romola's hagiographic practices mimic those of the ignorant Catholic masses, they are intended to represent a more evolved and morally responsible use of storytelling.

Despite the fact that Eliot considered Romola to be the best thing she ever wrote, it has long puzzled and frustrated modern readers. This is not only because the novel, as Susan Greenstein quips, was “researched to death in the womb” (496), but because the novel seems to violate Eliot's commitment to realism both in its characterization and its plot. The novel is set in fifteenth-century Florence and its heroine, Romola, is the beautiful young daughter of a blind old classical scholar. Romola, although intelligent, channels all her passion and energy into serving her father; eventually her husband, Tito, also claims a share of her love and devotion. Romola's emotional world begins to disintegrate when her father dies. Shortly after Bardo's death, Tito, a charming but selfish social climber who has betrayed his own adoptive father, sells Bardo's cherished library for personal profit. With Romola's father dead and her faith and love in her husband extinguished by his treacherous act, she turns to the religious reformer Savonarola to provide her life with meaning, purpose, and moral guidance. Although Romola's association with Savonarola leads her to perform numerous acts of public charity, she seems motivated more by idolatry for her spiritual director than by disinterested love for others. It is Romola's loss of faith even in Savonarola that precipitates her true moral transformation. When Savonarola refuses to save Romola's godfather from execution through his political influence, Romola breaks with Savonarola and flees Florence, without any clear direction or plan of action.

Up to this point in the novel, the plot (aside from its many erudite tangents on the history and culture of fifteenth-century Florence) seems fairly straightforward and believable. But then Eliot's novel lapses into a kind of dream sequence in which Romola sets herself adrift in a small boat and falls asleep. She awakes to find herself on the banks of a strange village and takes charge of a hungry Jewish baby orphaned by a recent outbreak of the plague. The surviving villagers, awestruck at the sudden manifestation of a beautiful woman with a baby on her arm, assume that she is the Madonna come to rescue them. At this point, Romola no longer requires a motive to do good: “the reasons for living, enduring labouring, never took the form of an argument” (527). Not only does Romola nurse the sick back to health, but the other villagers are shamed and inspired by her example into disregarding their fears of the pestilence and helping out as well. After this transfiguration of Romola into what J. B. Bullen describes as "a depressing
paragon of virtue” (425), she carries her newfound moral outlook back to Florence, where she takes into her home the two illegitimate children of her now-dead husband, along with their mother, Tessa, an unlettered and simple-minded peasant. Romola is presented in the final scene of the novel as the head of an unconventional, female-dominated household, the keeper of the memories of all the important men in her life, and the moral educator of Tito’s son Lillo.

In its plot and narrative conventions, Romola appears at first glance so distinct from Eliot’s other works that a 1998 anthology devoted to criticism on Romola “invites readers to refuse the apparent fixity of the body of George Eliot the author—her biography, her intentions, her ‘complete’ works—in order to allow the single text [that of Romola] to become multiple and rich” (Levine and Turner 4). As interesting as such readings may be, I contend that Romola is often considered a failure precisely because we do not well enough understand its authorial and cultural contexts, in particular, the theological issues plaguing Eliot and other Victorian intellectuals. So far, the most convincing and successful readings of Romola are those, such as Carole Robinson’s and Felicia Bonaparte’s, which address the novel’s obsession with the collapse of meaning and the death of God. Robinson remarks Romola’s potential as “a manifesto of a Victorian existentialism” (213) and draws attention to the book’s “proliferation of father-figures” who die (often violently) in the course of the narrative, associating them with “the absent ultimate authority, the banished God of Victorian agnosticism” (219). Bonaparte suggests that in Romola, Eliot “anticipated Nietzsche in predicting that the death of God threatened to usher in the age of nihilism. For what indeed is there to believe in?” (141).

The successful closure of the typical nineteenth-century novel relies upon fulfillment, whether theological, material, erotic, psychological, or a combination thereof; Romola is a story of loss. This may explain, in part, why Eliot felt compelled to experiment so drastically with readerly expectation and novelistic convention. Bonaparte, along with J. B. Bullen and other critics, explains how Romola could be considered a symbolic story of human moral development—heavily influenced by Comtean Positivism—tracing humankind’s development from egoism to altruism. Bonaparte regards Romola’s structure predominantly as modern myth, with “Romola as the traditional epic hero whose character and fate encompass the life of a people” (20)

Indeed, the story of Romola is steeped in classical allusion. But Romola’s structure is as much indebted to pre-Reformation Christian (and later, Roman Catholic) narratives as it is to pagan ones. Romola is initially figured both as Antigone, the loyal daughter of blind old Oedipus, and as
Ariadne, joined with Bacchus (Tito) in an exclusively pleasurable union that denies the fact of human suffering. As Romola comes to accept Christianity’s narrative of the Suffering Servant, however, she “outgrows” classical narratives, and the novel becomes even more of a narrative hybrid. The novel’s Proem, after all, describes a former Florentine who, though steeped in classical learning, “had not . . . neglected to hang up a waxen image or double of himself under the protection of the Madonna Annunziata, or to do penance for his sins in large gifts to the shrines of saints whose lives had not been modeled on the study of the classics” (7; emphasis added). Although Romola’s narrative—like her life itself—appropriates elements of pagan myth, not until she embraces a distinctively Christian narrative can she evolve into a secular Madonna, and the narrative itself culminate as hagiography.

A few critics have considered hagiography in Romola as a uniquely appropriate form for a female bildungsroman. “It is though the only discourse George Eliot can trust when she seeks to express the vision of woman coming to authority,” states Gillian Beer of Romola, “is that of the saint’s legend.” Beer points out Anna Jameson’s influence on Eliot, including Jameson’s suggestion that Catholic hagiography “should be seen as offering an alternative set of symbolic insights . . . for women” who did not have a classical education (123). Although Romola’s reincarnation as a saint, an emblem of moral power, attracts some feminist critics, theories of hagiography reveal some inconsistencies between notions of sainthood as defined by various religious traditions, and modern ideals of female self-assertion. Kimberly Van Esveld Adams argues that Romola-as-Madonna is:

Eliot’s symbol of a woman who has developed her intellectual and emotional capacities, who lives for herself but also for others, as a wife and mother; a woman who is independent yet also materially grounded in her own body and connected to the social body. . . . The Madonna in Eliot thus represents that state woman should but cannot yet achieve. (161)

As attractive as this description is, sharing a cup of milk with a baby exposed to the plague, as Romola does (524), and devoting one’s life to the care of one’s husband’s mistress and her children seem beyond the pale of living “for [one]self.”

Madonna Romola’s actions seem to conform more closely to Edith Wyschogorod’s definition of a saint in Saints and Postmodernism. Drawing upon narratives of devout, altruistic men and women from all major world religions, Wyschogorod describes a saint as “[. . .] one whose adult life in its entirety is devoted to the alleviation of sorrow (the psychological
suffering) and pain (the physical suffering) that afflicts other persons without distinction to rank or group or, alternatively, that affects sentient beings, whatever the cost to the saint in pain or sorrow” (34). What renders traditional constructions of sainthood contradictory to modern constructions of an empowered female self is that the practice of saintly action seems to negate the notion of “self” altogether. William James, who considered sainthood a legitimate psychological condition, described it in *Varieties of Religious Experience* as a permanent, paradigmatic shift in which the soul reaches a “genuinely heroic” state (211), one characterized by a shedding of all inhibitions and reservations in regard to the Other. Exhibiting the virtues of asceticism, moral fearlessness, purity, and charity, the saint is compelled “by organic consequence” of this “natural psychic complex” (225) to perform even unpleasant and arduous tasks of love and service for the Other. What James describes as the dropping of all inhibitions is, according to Wyschogorod’s theory, the actual erasure of boundaries between Self and Other: “The Other is swallowed up by the self as an object of utility, desire, or representation and becomes part of the self’s conative, affective, or cognitive structure” (33). To describe self-renunciation in terms of desire, as Wyschogorod does, may seem paradoxical, yet asceticism, as Geoffrey Harpham explains, “is essentially a meditation on, even an enactment of, desire. [. . . ] It proposes gratifications which are represented both as ‘anti-desire’ and yet (for this reason) more desirable than desire because they do not insult the conscience” (45–46).

Another potential difficulty (or possibility) in using hagiography as a model of female empowerment is that hagiography attempts to transcend sex and gender, as barriers that separate Self from Other. “The hagiographic body,” states Wyschogorod, “is neuter. No sexual identity can be inscribed on its surface because the saintly body accommodates all sexual identities [. . . ]” (116). Of course, the heroine of *Romola*, on her progress toward secular, “neuter” sainthood, paradoxically must confront a succession of obstacles that faced all Victorian women concerned with issues of personal faith, spiritual integrity, and ethical agency. But the chapter of “Romola’s Waking,” which so many readers find unrealistic and even “depressing,” attempts to represent a human subject transcending the shackles of self-interest and—to some extent—gendered roles. Even as Madonna Romola comes across as an essentialist vision of sacred womanhood, it is a vision of womanhood that eclipses male authority. Madonna Romola’s status as “mother” does not rely upon any man, and her moral power—for the first time in the book—is not informed by father, godfather, or spiritual director. Madonna Romola possesses the authority to act as confessor to the village priest who withheld aid from the sick (525); on an allegorical level,
she also wields supreme moral authority in place of God. In this manner, Romola demonstrates the lethal potential of sainthood. Sainthood is in fact “deadly” because it kills not only the self, but all self-projections that only serve to gratify the ego. In *Romola*, the most ambitious and most limiting of these self-projections is the anthropomorphic image of God, and God’s death is essential for Romola’s apotheosis, ending the chain of male deaths in the novel: father, brother, husband, godfather, and spiritual director.

**Carnival Saints vs. ”Real” Saints in *Romola***

In an article entitled “The Other Side of Carnival: Romola and Bakhtin,” Hilda Hollis points out that “carnival is a natural element in Eliot’s novel [. . . ] [it] opens in the marketplace, and festivals and carnivals permeate it. All is brought into the realm of carnival” (233). The carnival, as a melding of pagan lore and superstition to orthodox church observances, represents both pre- and post-Reformation Catholicism as Protestants viewed it: a rich Christian tradition hopelessly corrupted by its own eagerness to pander to the basest aspects of human nature. The “logic” (or more accurately, illogic) of carnival also speaks to the position of the nineteenth-century intellectual—acutely aware (as she observes the religious procession) of the material, sham nature of carnival saints or “idols.” Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, following the lead of Mikhail Bakhtin, discuss how carnival celebrates the lower-class body. “Fundamental to the corporeal, collective nature of carnival laughter is what Bakhtin terms ‘grotesque realism.’ Grotesque realism uses the material body—flesh conceptualized as corpulent excess—to represent cosmic, social, topographical and linguistic elements of the world” (9). Eliot’s narrator, witnessing the Florentine carnival, vividly describes “grotesque” representations of celestial saints that are no more than the sum of dust, tinsel, and sturdy peasant bodies:

[ . . . ] more wonderful still, saints of gigantic size, with attendant angels, might be seen, not seated, but moving in a slow, mysterious manner along the streets, like a procession of colossal figures come down from the high domes and tribunes of the churches. The clouds were made of good woven stuff, the saints and cherubs were unglorified mortals supported by firm bars, and those mysterious giants were really men of very steady brain, balancing themselves on stilts, and enlarged, like Greek tragedians, by huge masks and stuffed shoulders; but he was a miserably unimaginative Florentine who thought only of that—nay, somewhat impious, for in the
image of sacred things was there not some virtue of sacred things themselves? (80)

In this passage, Eliot emphasizes the carnival saints’ size and their solidity, highlighting the paradox of seeking the immaterial sacred through an accretion of objects and an enlargement of human bodies. According to Stallybrass and White, carnivalesque, “[g]rotesque realism images the human body as multiple, bulging, over- or under-sized, protuberant or incomplete” (9). The novel demonstrates a real repugnance—what Stallybrass and White term “bourgeois hysteria”—for the lower-class body and its insatiable appetite. The task of representing St. John the Baptist, for example, “not among the prizes of high life,” is compensated by a collection of delicacies including “a cake weighing fourteen pounds” (87). The novel shows us St. John the Baptist—who, according to Scripture, subsisted on locusts and honey—receiving his prize: “whereupon the eidolon of the austere saint at once invigorated himself with a reasonable share of the sweets and wine, threw the remnants to the crowd, and embraced the mighty cake securely with his right arm through the remainder of the passage” (87). These carnival figures ultimately speak to the absurdity of anthropomorphism, which Matthew Arnold described in Literature and Dogma (1873) as the mainstay of popular religion. U. C. Knopfelmacher suggests that George Eliot’s humanism “finds its most immediate counterpart in the religious thought of Matthew Arnold” (62), and Eliot surely would have agreed with Arnold’s assertion that “[p]opular theology rests on the eternal hypothesis of a magnified and non-natural man at the head of mankind’s and the world’s affairs” (120).

In Literature and Dogma, Arnold promotes a “revised” Christian worldview freed from Auberglaube, or “extra-belief”: unnecessary and false doctrine. Along with the notion of an anthropomorphized God, Arnold carefully prunes away all other doctrines that render the human body a basis for religious belief: incarnation, redemption through Christ’s physical death and resurrection, Christ’s healing of the sick. According to Arnold, the body has no place in religion, and Eliot seems to concur. For Eliot, the difficulty with anthropomorphism is less that it is an empty signifier, but that it encourages a piety that is entirely self-focused. The religious devotion that most clearly illustrates this phenomenon is the Florentines’ attitude toward the Virgin Mary, venerated especially “by hardy, scant-feeding peasant women [. . . ] [holding] in their hearts that meager hope of good and that wide dim fear of harm, which were somehow to be cared for the Blessed Virgin” (133). As befits a people who “had a Madonna who would do as they pleased” (351), popular piety increases
according to need when devotion to the Virgin might deliver Florence from its enemies.

Even worse, so attached are the Madonna’s devotees to her visible bodily representations that Church authorities can control the masses by manipulating their cherished paintings and statues. Two of the images of the Virgin Mary mentioned in *Romola* are often or always concealed; on the Feast of the Virgin’s Nativity the peasant women flock to see a “miraculous image, painted by the angels, [which] was to have the curtain drawn away from it on this Eve of her Nativity, that its potency might stream forth without obstruction” (133). In a later public religious observance, the “nucleus of the procession” is the Unseen Madonna:

[... ] the mysterious hidden Image—hidden first by rich curtains of brocade enclosing an outer painted tabernacle, but within this, by the more ancient tabernacle which had never been opened in the memory of living men, or the fathers of living men. In that inner shrine was the image of the Pitying Mother, found ages ago in the soil of L’Impruneta, uttering a cry as the spade struck it. (359)

Absence is a powerful motivator. When the cherished object disappears, the imagination runs riot and desire intensifies. The Church’s strategy of hiding its saints is echoed in the novel by a merchant who rouses the interest of his female buyers by concealing his merchandise:

Tito recognized his acquaintance Bratti, who stood with his back against a pillar and his mouth pursed up in a disdainful silence, eyeing everyone who approached him with a cold glance of superiority, and keeping his hand fast on a serge covering, which concealed the contents of the basket slung before him. Rather surprised at a deportment so unnatural in an anxious trader, Tito went nearer and saw two women go up to Bratti’s basket with a look of curiosity, whereupon the pedlar drew the covering tighter, and looked another way. It was quite too provoking, and one of the women was fain to ask what there was in the basket? (134)

So skilled is Bratti at his game of concealment that the women agree to buy, and negotiate a price, even before he exhibits the talismans for sale: “two clumsy iron rings [... ] the entirely hidden character of their potency [in warding off pestilence] [... ] so satisfactory, that the grossi were paid without grumbling [... ]” (135). Interestingly, Tito plays a hiding “game” with Romola later in the story when he conceals her dead brother’s crucifix in a gaily painted triptych he commissioned as a betrothal gift. As he hides
the crucifix, Tito attempts to convince Romola that he has buried death and human suffering “in a tomb of joy” (191). Romola, not fooled by such a maneuver, remains tantalized by the thought of Dino’s crucifix and what it represents, to the point where she finally opens the triptych and wears the cross on her flight from Florence.

Tito has far more success in fooling Tessa, who seems to embody all the weaknesses and religious superstitions of her class. Tessa craves love, safety, food, and sleep. Her desires, centered on the most basic of human appetites, marks her state of eternal childhood, and to the end of the novel, she remains wrapped up in the pleasures of her confetti and cakes, her children (their actual upbringing confined to the care of Monna Lisa and Romola), her fine contadina dresses (in increasingly larger sizes [545]), and her sleep: “an amiable practice in everybody, and one that Tessa liked for herself” (546). While Tito has great success pandering to Tessa’s bodily appetites (he is, for example, continually bringing her things to eat), he also exploits her primitive religious beliefs. Not surprisingly, all Tessa’s religious observances are dictated by her childish desires, and she seems to equate spiritual virtue with the ability to get results. “I set myself Aves to say,” she tells Tito, “to see if they would bring you back, but I left off, because they didn’t” (141).

Tito and Tessa’s relationship, in fact, seems to represent the Catholic Church’s manipulation of the deluded lower-class Florentines throughout the entire novel. Tito, so beautiful of countenance that his barber tells the artist Piero to make “a Saint Sebastian of him that will draw troops of devout women” (40), controls Tessa through what she sees and does not see. Tessa seems incapable of abstract thought, for when Tito disappears, she cannot imagine “his whereabouts or his doings when she did not see him [. . . ], her thought, instead of following him, had stayed in the same spot where he was with her” (146). Tessa bases her entire theology on what she sees, and makes impressively confident—if mistaken—judgments about good and evil based on appearance alone. “[H]e was the devil—I know he was” (101), pronounces Tessa of her abusive stepfather, and tells Tito, soon after she meets him, that she trusts him “[b]ecause you are so beautiful—like the people going into Paradise—they are all good” (102). Tessa also bases her faith in the Madonna on what her images and statues look like: “I think the Holy Madonna will take care of me; she looks as if she would; and perhaps if I wasn’t idle, she wouldn’t let me be beaten” (105). Tito is also able to fool Tessa into thinking their mock wedding ceremony is genuine, since “[t]he altar-like table, with its gorgeous cloth, the row of tapers, the sham episcopal costume, the surpliced attendant [. . . ] were a sufficiently near parody of sacred things to rouse poor little Tessa’s
veneration; and there was some additional awe produced by the mystery of their apparition on the spot” (143).

Tito takes advantage of Tessa’s inclination to deify every beautiful person she sets her eyes on (including Romola), and his visits to her echo the apparition tales of La Salette. Even believers’ accounts of the apparition remark upon the ignorance of the “dull, unheeding shepherd children” (Villecourt 19); the Times insisted that the “dirty little peasants” “had been imposed upon by a simulated appearance,” since “nothing could be easier than to deceive peasant children of that tender age” (November 1854). Tessa, whose mental capacity clearly lags behind her years, quickly assumes that Tito “was something come from Paradise into a world where most things seemed hard and angry” (103). The mysterious, unpredictable nature of Tito’s visits also lends to his air of divine authority. On the day of his betrothal to Romola, he extracts from Tessa a promise “to be good and wait for me” and gives her a promise in return: “But I must go now. And remember what I told you, Tessa. Nobody must know that you ever see me, else you will lose me for ever. And now, when I have left you, go straight home, and never follow me again. Wait till I come to you. Good–by, my little Tessa: I will come” (189; emphasis in original). Tito, like the Virgin Mary in the stories of La Salette and of later apparitions, requests good behavior and threatens the withdrawal of divine favor if this request is not heeded. He also confers a sense of power on Tessa (and of course protects himself) by imparting to her a “secret”—in this case, the fact of the visits themselves.

In the Protestant view of apparition narratives, the Virgin’s visits confer a significant but false sense of empowerment. Some Catholics insisted that transformations in Melanie’s and Maximin’s character were one proof of the apparition’s veracity; Melanie, for example, was formerly “idle, disobedient, and inclined to pout” whereas after the Virgin’s visit she became “active and obedient; and she said her prayers better.” Her role was transformed from that of a slovenly shepherd girl (Ullathorne, Holy Mountain, 27) to “Sister Mary of the Cross,” whose “demeanor [was] singularly modest and recollected, and her manner simple and religious” (Ullathorne, Holy Mountain 16). Maximin was less successful in maintaining an aura of piety, but what is remarkable is the confidence and consistency with which the two uneducated children described the events of the apparition.3 They

3. Zimdars-Swartz writes that Maximin eventually “attempted several careers, ranging from liquor dealer to priest, only to find himself unsuited for any of them” (42). At one point he joined the Papal Zouaves (in defense of the Papal States against the Italian Risorgimento) only to be expelled for drunkenness (Harrison 300 n.106). Melanie became a nun, but her life was “unsettled and unhappy” (Zimdars-Swartz 42), and she butted heads with Church authorities
took the Virgin’s request for secrecy so seriously that they would not disclose the entirety of her message until they were allowed to send their “secrets” in a letter to the pope himself. In *Romola*, Tessa undergoes a marked transformation of her own. In her own eyes, she has been elevated from a helpless peasant girl to a well-off, respectable wife and mother. More significant, however, she recounts her own apparition narrative to Baldassarre (Tito’s cast-off father) with the air of a theologian capable of understanding ineffable mysteries. When Baldassarre inquires as to the identity of her “husband,” she replies:

“[. . . ] [H]e is more beautiful and good than anybody else in the world. I say prayers to him when he’s away. You couldn’t think what he is!”

She looked at Baldassarre with a wide glance of mysterious meaning, taking the baby from him again, and almost wishing he would question her as if he wanted very much to know more.

“Yes, I could,” said Baldassarre, rather bitterly.

“No, I’m sure you never could,” said Tessa, earnestly. “You thought he might be Norfri [Tessa’s stepfather],” she added with a triumphant air of conclusiveness. “But never mind; you couldn’t know. What is your name?”

(284)

Tessa’s assumption of religious and theological authority, based entirely on the evidence of her senses, is just one of many carnival inversions in the novel. The cult of the Virgin Mary has, in the history of the Catholic Church, been driven and shaped by popular religious practices and the desires of the masses. Typically, ordinary men and women assert the validity of an apparition long before the Church does; in the case of La Salette, official sanction of the site as a place of pilgrimage did not occur until 1851, five years after the actual event. Had not an estimated “sixty thousand pilgrims” flocked to La Salette on the first anniversary of the apparition (Fortier 31), the Church might conceivably have delayed or withheld its sanction altogether. Similar to the seers at La Salette (and the pilgrims that initially followed), Tessa does not require orthodox approval or outside guidance to anthropomorphize God through the comely person of Tito.

4. In the nineteenth century, for example, “The Church was often reluctant to accept popular visions because they threatened the hierarchy and doctrine of the male-dominated faith. However, persistent displays of popular piety, combined with favorable outcomes of ecclesiastical investigations, sometimes led the Church to incorporate these visions into mainstream Catholic thought” (Kaufman 207 n.2).
While Tito’s “apparitions” appear to have given Tessa voice and authority, she is of course merely exploited. In her first meeting with Baldassarre, she is depicted as a fallen Madonna, “a pretty loving apparition” (282), who, although ignorant of her real social status as an unwed mother, immediately conveys it to Baldassarre when she produces her “bimbo.” She is, to Baldassarre, an image which inspires pity rather than reverence: “Poor thing! poor thing!” he said [. . .]. It did not seem to him as if this guileless loving little woman could reconcile him to the world at all, but rather that she was with him against the world, that she was a creature who would need to be avenged” (284). When Tessa takes leave of Baldassarre, she, too, makes a promise, but one she cannot enforce, given her subordinate status in the household, beneath Tito and even the servant Monna Lisa: “You will come here and rest when you like; Monna Lisa says you may. And don’t you be unhappy, for we’ll be good to you” (284). “Poor thing!” repeats Baldassarre in reply, knowing that Tito, when he returns, will not be “good” to him.

Although Tessa, in her newfound prosperity, demonstrates sensitivity to the pain of others who once suffered like herself, her exploited position hinders her from the full exercise of her moral agency. Tessa’s interactions with her “saint,” therefore, are notable only in the immediate—if superficial—gratifications they provide her, as well as the extent to which they limit her power even as they improve her material circumstances. She can speak about her holy patron with the air of authority, but Baldassarre, knowing the truth, will never be persuaded to adopt Tessa’s view of his traitorous son. Tessa’s situation, which represents the false empowerment and exploitation perpetuated by the Florentine cult of the Madonna, sets the stage for Romola’s depiction of “true” sainthood, visible apparitions which, while still relying on the evidence of the viewer’s/hearer’s senses, prompt in them genuine moral transformations and effective altruistic behavior. Wyschogrod defines hagiography in part by its effect on its hearers; significantly, these effects have nothing to do with self-gratification:

The [saint’s tale’s] chronological strands and textual voices may appear to the reader to convey information and, as such, to reflect an attitude of factuality toward what is recounted [. . .]. But even if what occurs is brought to light in the indicative mood, the hagiographic material is united and framed by the imperative mood. [. . .] The imperative mood of the tale solicits others to transform their lives. [. . .] The story’s success is not measured in aesthetic or cognitive terms but rather in regard to whether the addressees experience the saint’s spiritual rebirth as an existential demand. (10)
Although hearing the story of a saint’s life does not possess the immediacy of witnessing a saint’s appearance (whether naturally or supernaturally) firsthand, hagiography is, according to Wyschogrod, an attempt to replicate the “flesh and blood existent” (3) that inspires people to perform moral acts in turn. The successful saint’s tale—like the successful apparition in Romola—has an “imperative” quality, in that it prompts people not toward self-love but toward self-sacrifice and unconditional love for the Other (the “existential demand”).

For Romola to perform saintly action, and for her narrative to take on a hagiographic quality, two conditions must be met. First, Romola must act, not out of love or reverence for any authority or father figure, but out of spontaneous love (agape) for the Other in need. To wean Romola off her chronic dependence on human authority, the novel literally kills off all the men in her life. Although Savonarola and Tito do not die until the end of the novel, they are already emotionally severed from Romola by the time she climbs into her boat. Romola’s terrifying trip downriver illustrates the depth of her bereavement:

Romola felt orphaned in those wide spaces of sea and sky. She read no message of love for her in that far-off symbolic writing of the heavens, and with a great sob she wished that she might be gliding into death.

She drew the cowl over her head again and covered her face, choosing darkness rather than the light of the stars, which seemed to her like the hard light of eyes that looked at her without seeing her. (475)

Romola, as she drifts downriver, feels that she is in her grave, “touching the hands of the beloved dead beside her, trying to wake them” (475). This scene evokes the agonies of religious skepticism and the one underlying, horrible question which so haunted thoughtful men and women throughout the nineteenth century: Could there be any meaning or purpose in life without a God? Ambitiously, Eliot attempts to provide an answer in the very next chapter: the way out of secularism’s existential dilemma is a complete and radical “shift of emotional center towards love and compassion—toward a ‘yes, yes,’ rather than a ‘no, no’” (James 4) in respect to the Other. This kind of moral heroism, traditionally modeled by the Catholic Church as a state of being which best emulates the life of Christ, is only attainable in Romola once “the likenesses and analogies of God” have been erased. While the Suffering Christ on Dino’s crucifix represents for Romola the only true and worthwhile route to human happiness, all motives for her altruism ultimately must emanate from within. Romola’s transfiguration into the Virgin Mary suggests that true moral heroism depends upon
becoming God ourselves, so that perfect benevolence becomes an inherently human (rather than divine) attribute.

The second condition for Romola’s “sainthood” is that her benevolent actions carry with them a moral imperative for others. Although Romola, upon awakening in her little village, feeds the hungry and nurses the sick, her most significant contribution is her ability to inspire altruism in others. As Wyschogorod argues, “exemplary lives in which saintly power and its renunciation figure teach moral practice by way of practice” (52). When Romola first manifests herself at the village well, the case of mistaken identity that ensues closely resembles the incident at La Salette. Relying on the evidence of his senses alone, a young man mistakes the imposing, mysterious visitor for the Virgin Mary:

Romola certainly presented a sight which, at that moment and in that place, could hardly be seen without some pausing and palpitation. With her gaze fixed intently on the distant slope, the long lines of her thick grey garment giving a gliding character to her rapid walk, her hair rolling backward and illuminated on the left side by sun-rays, the little olive baby on her right arm now looking out with jet-black eyes, she might well startle that youth of fifteen, accustomed to swing the censer in the presence of a Madonna less fair and marvelous than this.

“She carries a pitcher in her hand—to fetch water for the sick. It is the Holy Mother, come to take care of the people who have the pestilence.”

It was a sight of awe: she would perhaps, be angry with those who fetched water for themselves only. The youth flung down his vessel in terror [. . .]. (522)

The youth’s first reaction to this vision is a sense of shame for neglecting the sick. This presents an interesting contrast to the Virgin at La Salette, who scolded her people only for a lack of reverence and devotion to herself and her Son: blaspheming God’s name, missing Sunday Mass, eating meat during Lent. Madonna Romola is not so selfish and evokes a sense of shame for the neglect of other flesh-and-blood human beings. This shame also fills the village priest as soon as he hears about the apparition from his young altar boy: “[H]e trembled at the pestilence, but he also trembled at the thought of the mild-faced Mother, conscious that the Invisible Mercy might demand something more of him than prayers and ‘Hails’” (524). When the priest does encounter Romola shortly afterward, she holds him morally accountable for the neglect of his office and demands a change in his behavior: “And now tell me father, how this pestilence came, and why you let your people die without the Sacraments, and lie unburied. For I am
come over the sea to help those who are left alive—and you, too, will help them now” (525). Romola enlists both the priest and the youth to aid her in caring for the sick: “That was a dreadful proposal to Jacopo, and to the priest also; but they were both under a peculiar influence forcing them to obey. The suspicion that Romola was a supernatural form was dissipated, but their minds were filled instead with the more effective sense that she was a human being whom God had sent over the sea to command them” (526). The priest’s and the youth’s motivation to altruism is “more effective” once they realize that Romola is an ordinary human being, because it is rooted less in fear now than in an admiration for Romola’s selfless love.

The villagers persist in regarding Romola as one sent by God, and they reverence her as a saint. But yet again, this is not for any supernatural quality she demonstrates, but for the extraordinary power of her benevolence toward others:

Every day the Padre and Jacopo and the small flock of surviving villagers paid their visit to this cottage to see the Blessed Lady, and to bring her of their best as an offering—honey, fresh cakes, eggs, and polenta. It was a sight which none of them could forget, a sight they all told of in their old age—how the sweet and sainted Lady with her fair face, her golden hair, and her brown eyes that had a blessing in them, lay weary with her labours after she had been sent over the sea to help them in their extremity [. . .]. [S]he told them if they loved her they must be good to Benedetto [the Jewish orphan baby]. (526–27)

Romola’s moral influence does not fade after she returns to Florence. Indeed, the legend of her benevolence and her command to “be good” flourishes in her absence, to the point where storytelling functions as a means to fill the void left by the Madonna’s departure. The reader is left to presume that this story will be different from those told about the “Hidden Madonna” of the Florentines, however, for it depicts the Madonna actively working for others—to the point of exhaustion—in a way that ordinary men and women can and must imitate: “Yes, yes,” cry the villagers in response to Romola’s command, “we will be good to the little Benedetto!” (530).

Some critics have expressed disappointment with the seemingly anti-climactic nature of Romola’s epilogue: After tearing herself away (or being torn away) from all ties that constrain her, Romola heroically rescues a plague-stricken village, only to return to Florence and a small domestic enclosure where she watches over Tito’s children and “the feeble women
in her domestic circle” (Booth 126). Certainly the epilogue seems less fantastic and more realistic than the altruistic utopia of the village, where Romola can exercise saintly action untrammeled by “all the special ties of marriage, the State, and religious discipleship” (527) in Florence. Unlike the village, Florence as yet has no use for a “Visible Madonna,” so Romola must accommodate herself to one of the few female roles sanctioned by her society, that of a widowed matriarch. Nonetheless, Romola still retains an aura of sainthood through her motivations and actions. Her decision to adopt Tito’s children emanates not from a sense of duty, but from pure desire: “She never for a moment told herself that it was heroism or exalted charity in her to seek these beings; she needed something that she was bound specially to care for; she yearned to clasp the children and to make them love her” (532). And once again, the very strength of Romola’s altruistic example compels others to follow suit. Romola’s cousin Monna Brigida, who could not be deterred from her self-indulgent ways even by Savonarola’s hell-and-brimstone rhetoric, now readily agrees to help Romola care for Lillo and Ninna—despite her contempt for their Tessa as a “puss-faced minx” (534). Fittingly, Romola returns to Tessa in the form of an apparition, clasping a favorite lost necklace round Tessa’s neck, declaring that “God has sent me to you again” (534).

Another surprising aspect of the novel’s epilogue is that Romola, whose multiple bereavements helped to transform her into a saint, is finally shown paying wistful homage to the memories of Savonarola, her father, and Tito. Romola’s powerful moral agency seems downplayed, as the reader’s attention is pulled toward Savonarola’s altar, which young Ninna is decorating in commemoration of his death. Romola’s final words in the novel are delivered to Lillo, whom she hopes to make into a scholar, like her father, who “had the greatness that belongs to integrity” and “chose poverty and obscurity rather than falsehood,” and praises Savonarola for his “struggle against powerful wrong” and his attempt “to raise men to the highest deeds they are capable of” (547). Most surprising, however, are Romola’s remembrances of the treacherous Tito, who, she insisted, “never thought of doing anything cruel or base” when she first met him. But the novel’s conclusion suggests that Lillo—who already demonstrates some of his father’s less admirable characteristics, such as a love for pleasure—may well gain more moral instruction from an honest account of Tito’s shortcomings than from glowing tales of Bardo’s or Savonarola’s virtue. Romola promises to tell Lillo, one day, about a man “who denied his father, and left him to misery” and “betrayed every trust reposed in him, that he might keep himself safe and get rich and prosperous” (548).
Inspired by midcentury controversy over the Roman Catholic cult of the saints, controversies over the Immaculate Conception, and published tales of the apparition at La Salette, Eliot reforms hagiography in Romola in several distinct ways. Eliot’s Madonna, as she is in Protestant-authored texts, remains a symbol of secularism, but a secularism, paradoxically, that frees both women and men to develop their highest moral potential. Father Louis De Montfort, a seventeenth-century French priest whose book, True Devotion to Mary, was translated and published in England by Frederick Faber in the 1860s, proclaimed that Mary “will consequently produce the greatest saints that there will be in the end of time” (21). De Montfort regards Mary as the primary assailant against evil in the world’s final age and argues that her saints “shall be singularly devout to our Blessed Lady, illumined by her light, strengthened by her nourishment, led by her spirit, supported by her arm and sheltered under her protection” (27). In Eliot’s novel, Romola-as-Madonna does represent an apocalyptic age of fulfilled moral potential, but how differently than De Montfort pictured: an age made possible by the absence of God. Without God as a mirror of the self, secular saints are free to direct their love toward the suffering Other.

This moral ideal presented in Romola, however, refers to a future age, and Romola’s final tales of Savonarola and Tito—highly gifted but flawed men—suggests that in the interim, hagiography does not require morally perfect subjects. One of the insights Romola receives on her return to Florence is that high moral ideals can and must hold steady in spite of human weakness. Recalling how both Tito’s and Savonarola’s behavior had assaulted her faith in goodness, she reflects: “Was she then, something higher, that she should shake the dust from off her feet, and say, ‘This world is not good enough for me’? If she had been really higher she would not so easily have lost all her trust” (529). By picking and choosing the material of others’ lives to create a morally edifying tale, Romola is depicted, in the book’s epilogue, as both hagiographer and artist. Margaret Homans has pointed out that Romola, who passes the days in her father’s household reading aloud to him, “submissively bear[s] the word of women’s exclusion from and silencing within literature” (201) and is represented “not touching, and being untouched by, the texts she transmits” (202). But Romola as hagiographer—the keeper of a largely oral tradition for the moral guidance of the uneducated—represents a literary form far more useful, powerful, and long-lived than the classical treatises Bardo so cherished, represented in Dino’s nightmare as dry parchments disintegrating into blood and consumed by fire (152–53). As hagiographer, Romola no longer possesses the heroic stature of a life-giving Madonna. By encouraging others toward moral action through her stories, however, she can remain a Madonna by
proxy—a role, perhaps, that Eliot (who encouraged various friends and admirers to call her “Madonna”) envisioned for herself.

In the twenty-first century, the Virgin Mary and her apparitions continue to serve as an emblem of the clash between secularism and traditional religious beliefs. As Sandra Zimdars-Schwartz has noted, La Salette was only the beginning of a series of modern apparitions that have attracted international attention. Today, people from all over the world flock to Medjugorje in the former Yugoslavia (Herzegovina), which believers claim as the site of ongoing apparitions and messages from Mary since 1981. This is the best known of recent apparitions, but far from the only one. “The considerable public attention that has been given to some of the apparitions of the past several decades,” states Zimdars-Schwartz, “has created the impression that apparitions are proliferating—an impression that inspires different responses from different quarters” (18). Just as the accounts of the Virgin of La Salette provoked both Catholics and Protestants (albeit in different ways) anxious about secularism, the messages from Medjugorje appeal to modern believers’ anxieties about loss of faith and the impending Day of Judgment. Many believers (akin to Louis De Montfort) interpret Mary’s messages as a call to join her in an apocalyptic “battle between good and evil,” a notion that has “very frequently led to a militant Marian ideology united with conservative political forces” (19). Skeptics, on the other hand, simply identify secularism as the key pressure fueling apparition claims.

In the United States, the Virgin Mary has come to represent the clash between (or perhaps the merging of) the sacred and the profane in quite different ways. The news media is quick to report stories of weeping statues and incidents of religious pareidolia—that phenomenon where individuals discern familiar, religious images in a field of ambiguous stimuli. “Apparitions” such as the Virgin Mary’s image on the side of a Florida bank building in 1996, or more recently, her face on the surface of a grilled cheese sandwich, provide opportunities not only for secular news media to poke fun at religious beliefs, but also for good old-fashioned American entrepreneurship (the grilled cheese sandwich fetched $28,000 on eBay). Is there any element of religious belief, longing, or reverence in popular enthusiasm for such phenomena? That is a question for another study.