Victorian Women Writers, Radical Grandmothers, and the Gendering of God

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Ariadne and the Madonna

THE HERMENEUTICS OF THE GODDESS IN GEORGE ELIOT’S ROMOLA

Every God, even including the God of the Word, relies on a mother Goddess.
—Julia Kristeva, The Portable Kristeva, edited by Kelly Oliver 322

She [George Eliot] is the first great godless writer of fiction that has appeared in England.
—W. H. Mallock, “Impressions of Theophrastus Such” 562

IN THE FINAL CHAPTER of this study, I turn to the 1860s and George Eliot’s early novel Romola, which revolves around the eponymous heroine who is constantly referred to as “Madonna.” Eliot, who was called “Madonna” by G. H. Lewes, and “Our Lady” by her friends, also felt a deep admiration for Raphael’s Sistine Madonna, the painting Anna Jameson praised so highly. However, unlike Barrett Browning, Brontë, Nightingale, and Jameson, who can be said to have been believers, Eliot was an agnostic. Thus her reverence for the Madonna is a conundrum for modern readers. I suggest that Eliot’s attraction to the Virgin can be explained in part by closely reading the goddess imagery in Romola, for in this novel Eliot merges the Virgin with the pagan goddess Ariadne in order to imagine an ethical system complex enough to confront the trauma of modern life. I suggest, too, that by combining classical and Christian female gods, Romola follows a pattern set by freethinker Eliza Sharples, who figured the Virgin/Isis as the horizon for female perfection, thus making Utopia available through the
political acts of educated, loving women in the public sphere. I will show
that the setting of quattrocento Florence for *Romola* is crucial to creating
a dynamic horizon of opportunity for the heroine. That dynamic includes
the unique combination of Catholic worship of the Virgin, zealous Renais-
sance study of the pagan mysteries and antiquities, and a republican form
of government underwritten by Christian belief.

Eliot first saw “this sublimest picture,” Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna*, in
Dresden in 1858. Her journal describes sitting “down on the sofa opposite
the picture for an instant, but a sort of awe, as if I were suddenly in the
presence of some glorious being, made my heart swell too much for me to
remain comfortably, and we hurried out of the room” (Haight, *George Eliot*
264). We might expect such a response from Florence Nightingale, who
was an adept of mystic states, but not from the agnostic Eliot. It appears,
however, that she was genuinely overcome by mystical ecstasy of some sort
when gazing upon what she perceived as the originary site of love and feel-
ing. Indeed, the experience sounds like a Pauline road to Damascus moment,
when the renegade is struck down physically and psychically by a numinous
encounter with a “glorious being.” Eliot did not convert overnight to any
religion as Saul did. Rather, she represents a unique modern sensibility,
which allowed her to experience a mystical encounter while retaining the
belief that no single god was complex enough to explain or comprehend
modern existence. As Peter C. Hodgson writes, hers was an “agnostic, apo-
phatic faith, which kept the reality of God in suspense even as it affirmed
the reality of duty and love” (2).

Eliot’s translation of Ludwig Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity* aids the
reader in understanding the fear and rapture she experienced upon seeing
Raphael’s famous painting. Like Sharples and Eliot, the German intellectual
interpreted God as a projection of the highest ideals of human behavior; in
other words, the sacred was in man and in the world, not outside in some
separate heavenly sphere (see Susan E. Hill). Following upon this logic,
Feuerbach contends that “to think is to be God” (*Essence of Christianity* 40).
Eliot concurred with Feuerbach’s relativist approach, writing, “The contem-
plation of whatever is great is itself religion,” and “The idea of God is the
idea of a goodness entirely human” (*GEL* 4:104; 1:98). Rejecting abstract
dogma, Eliot believed that only “truth of feeling” could create love and
generosity between human beings, and then only gradually (Hodgson 19;
*GEL* 1:162). As she wrote on 11 December 1880, “the reason why societ-
ies change slowly is, because individual men and women cannot have their
natures changed by doctrine and can only be wrought on by little and little”
(*GEL* 7:346).
Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity* underwrote Eliot’s belief in the religion of feeling. Asserting that feeling is what “makes God a man” and “man a God,” the German author described the purest human emotions as “religious.” He suggested, as well, that the human “yearning after God is the yearning” for what God essentially is—“unlimited,” “undisturbed,” “uninterrupted, pure feeling, feeling for which there exists no limits, no opposite” (281, 283). Feuerbach points out, though, that the supreme mystery, Christ’s passion, is a misnomer because only humans can suffer, and thus they are, in effect, superior to God (333). Viewing love as the premier emotion, he concludes that *caritas* is “essentially feminine” and that any belief in divine love must acknowledge that the highest form of godhood was feminine (70, 72). In keeping with his adulation of women, Feuerbach decries the irrationality of a heavenly Trinity that includes the Father and Son but not the Mother (72). For Eliot, the *Sistine Madonna* seems to have captured this notion of supernal, motherly love, although when faced with the majesty of the painting, she could not manage this religion of feminine feeling that overwhelmed her.

Eliot’s encounter with the *Sistine Madonna* might also remind us of the medieval Beguine Beatrijs of Nazareth. Naming the seven stages through which mortals pass to merge with God’s love, Beatrijs depicted the third phase as one in which the self recognizes its inability to love perfectly. Hence the mystic experiences “Excess,” “torment,” and “violence” because, although she feels an upwelling of love for God/Love, she simultaneously suffers because she cannot enact perfect caritas (Petroff 58–59). Perhaps Eliot felt a form of “unlimited,” “uninterrupted feeling” when she saw the *Sistine Madonna* and thus experienced a glimpse of godhood or perfect love in herself. Feeling the excess and violence necessary to produce perfect love, and cognizant that Victorian society expected such love from all women, the tormented Eliot ran from the room. Or, more precisely, in coming face to face with the image of the Madonna, perhaps Eliot felt the violence at the heart of her own demand that supernal love required “resignation to individual nothingness,” and at that point she was ineluctably shaken to the core (see GEL 2:49). Held captive in that epiphanic moment by the prospect of divine, interminable, unlimited love and its extraordinary, even nauseating, expectations, Eliot may have rushed away to the serene attractions and relative stability of atheism.

Nevertheless, in her writing, Eliot courageously returned to what the Madonna figure represented as a model for human behavior, despite the terrifying cost to the self. Finding in Christianity the altruism necessary to withstand existential angst, Eliot acerbically commented to her friend Bar-
bara Bodichon, “The highest ‘calling and election’ is to do without opium and live through all our pain with conscious, clear-eyed endurance” (GEL 3:366). She wrote this gloomy statement the day after Christmas in 1860, one of the holiest times of year for Christians, when Eliot was about to begin her research for Romola. Perhaps more telling regarding Eliot’s analysis of gender, hermeneutics, and the solution to ethical impasse was her comment that she began writing Romola as a “young woman,—I finished it an old woman” (qtd. in Haight 362). If Eliot focused explicitly on the Madonna, in Romola she also referred positively to the “great goddesses.” She may have been inspired by Margaret Fuller, who argued that in ancient times women were valued because mythologies featured “great goddesses” like the Egyptian Isis, whose wisdom was unrivaled (Woman in the Nineteenth Century). Eliot would certainly have been aware of Fuller’s admiration for pagan goddesses, since she had reviewed Fuller’s work. Further, given Wollstonecraft’s and Fuller’s scandalous reputations, choosing to review Fuller’s Woman in the Nineteenth Century and Wollstonecraft’s Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1855) was a bold move for Eliot, who lived openly with a married man. But perhaps there was something equally scandalous in Eliot’s revival of the notion of the great goddess.

It is helpful to review the trajectory of Eliot’s theological heuristics as a context for understanding the complex, seemingly contradictory ethical system she develops in Romola. As a young woman, like many evangelicals Eliot was deeply immersed in the prophetic Book of Revelation and its depiction of the millennium. Like the feminist utopians and millenarians, many evangelicals believed that the extraordinary historical events beginning with the French Revolution pointed to the Second Coming. In a letter to Maria Lewis in 1838, the young Mary Ann Evans wondered whether her friend was “fond of the study of unfulfilled prophecy” (GEL 1:11–12). Deriding the “vagaries of the Irvingites and the blasphemies of Joanna Southcote,” Evans admitted that “prayerful consideration of the mighty revolutions ere long to take place in our world would by God’s blessings serve to make us less grovelling, more devoted and energetic in the service of God” (11–12). Avidly watching the signs of the times like Southcott, Evans contemplated writing a history of divination, an “Ecclesiastical Chart” that would correlate God’s prophecies with contemporary sociopolitical occurrences. She gave up the project only when she learned that other scholars had already published such charts (Krueger 239–40; see also Carpenter, George Eliot 3–29).

Gordon Haight argues that as she aged, Eliot became increasingly conservative in terms of gender and class politics, but it would be simplistic not to acknowledge that her political conservatism, like that of Ruskin and
Carlyle, had a hefty strain of the radical in it. The radical strain in Eliot was a result of her early friendship with Charles and Caroline Bray, whom she met when she and her father moved to Coventry in 1841. Attracted to radical ideas and scholarly discussion, the Brays held a salon known as the Rosehill Circle, which included many of the intellectual elite of the day. Through the Brays, Eliot made social and intellectual connections with Robert Owen, Saint-Simon, Harriet Martineau, and Herbert Spencer. Illustrating her meticulous awareness of political events, Eliot noted in her journal on 18 July 1869 that she and a group of friends, including feminist Barbara Bodichon, participated in “Some conversation about Saint-Simonism, à propos of the meeting on Woman’s Suffrage the day before, M. Ariès Dufour, being uneasy because Mill did not in his speech recognize what women owed to Saint Simonism” (Eliot, Journals 136; see also GEL 1:xliv).

Bray analyzed the French Revolution and socialism in The Philosophy of Necessity (1841), and statements in this text are mirrored in some of Eliot’s rhetoric. Condemning capitalism for making society more selfish, Bray agreed with the “advocates of ‘The New Moral World,’” a radical journal of the early part of the century. As Bray acknowledged, Engels and his ilk held that while “the law of universal brotherhood is inoperative” in a capitalist system, socialism advocated that citizens “would be as one family, each bringing what he possessed to the common stock for the general good” (393, 394). Bray also stated that socialism was possibly the last and highest form society would take in its movement toward “perfectibility” (412). However, he did not become a socialist because he did not consider the working classes evolved enough yet to follow its precepts (411). Nor did he believe that governmental entities had achieved the stability and power necessary to effect universal benefits for the working classes. For Bray, the only solution was to help society change gradually. As he remarked, “all great revolutions, to be permanent and efficacious, must be the produce of time; they cannot be brought about suddenly,” for the “mind requires to undergo a similarly gradual process in any great alteration of feeling and opinion” (404, 405).

Like her friend Bray, Eliot was also a gradualist who reasoned that the English masses were not quite ready for the progressive measures they demanded. But this did not cancel the author’s erstwhile belief in reform. In 1848, in a long letter to John Sibree, Jr., son of an Independent minister, Eliot comically referred to the “Millennium” that would come upon the heels of the recent revolution in France (GEL 1:252). She begins the letter by complimenting Sibree on being “sansculottish and rash” and explicitly worries that the Victorian period was what Saint-Simon referred to as a
critical age, that is, one that could not produce change, in contrast with organic ages that were capable of revolutionary action. Seriocomically Eliot also writes of wanting to see “such a scene as that of the men of the barricade bowing to the image of Christ ‘who first taught fraternity to men’” (253).

In a shift of tone, Eliot then brutally decries the French king who had been overthrown. “[P]reserve me,” she exclaims, “from sentimentalizing over a pampered old man when the earth has its millions of unfed souls and bodies” (GEL 1:254). Following this denunciation, Eliot could not be clearer about where her sympathies lay regarding England’s own historically deposed King: “I think the shades of the Stuarts would have some reason to complain if the Bourbons who are so little better than they, had been allowed to reign much longer” (254). But while she does not distinguish between the Bourbon and Stuart kings, Eliot notes a marked distinction between the contemporary English and French working classes. She asserts that, full of “selfish radicalism” and lacking intellect and the aspiration for justice, John Bull was “simply destructive.” In contrast, she observes that in France, “the mind of the people is highly electrified” by ideas, and thus their desire for social reform is authentic. Viewing the British as “slow crawlers,” Eliot argues that they were ready for only gradual reforms (254).

Eliot’s writing illustrates her exposure to the shaping forces of millenarianism and socialism. We have seen how Feuerbach strongly influenced Eliot’s thinking about what the concept of god encompassed. It is important to note her reactions to the writings of Auguste Comte as well. Remarking to Mrs. Richard Congreve that she was attracted to the “illumination” of positivism, Eliot added that she was “swimming in Comte” (along with “Euripides and Latin Christianity”) (GEL 4:116, 333). Like Feuerbach, Comte secularized the Christian religion, asserting that mankind moved through three historical phases, from polytheism, to monotheism, and finally positivism, a “religion of Humanity” based on scientific knowledge and altruism. Comte’s theorizing, like Feuerbach’s, is much in keeping with the secularization of religion and altruism. In fact, Comte was the first and most venerated disciple of the radical socialist reformer Henri de Saint-Simon, after whom the Saint-Simonians were named.

As with Feuerbach, Comte viewed women as the eidolon of the age and asserted that they would make a secular millennium possible. Comte probably acquired the view of woman as savior of the new age from the Saint-Simonians, although, ironically, he had originally broken from the Saint-Simonians because of their religiosity and their belief in a coming female divine. Nevertheless, Comte would end up asserting that the Catho-
The Church made a brilliant choice when, during the transition from polytheism to monotheism, it allowed its followers to continue their adoration of the Virgin. The originator of positivism saw the Virgin as a means of appealing to deep emotional needs and a step toward his own idea of humankind's highest aspirations. As Comte wrote, "It is from the feminine aspect only that human life, whether individually or collectively considered, can really be comprehended as a whole," because woman "is the purest and simplest impersonation of Humanity" who personifies "the principle of Love upon which the unity of our nature depends" (qtd. in Bullen 429, 433).

Although Eliot may have been the "first godless writer," as asserted in an epigraph to this chapter, when examining Eliot’s credo one should also consider Pamela Sue Anderson’s concept of the goddess as a model for what can exist in terms of human behavior and social regeneration (118, 158, 241). Indeed, the myth system Eliot brings to fruition in Romola rests, in great part, on her personal, ecstatic, mystical experience; radical notions of deity; and strong belief in the power of caritas to gradually bring humanity to a state of perfection. Here, we must return to her encounter with Raphael’s Sistine Madonna, a representation of woman as deity, as the source of unlimited feeling, unconditional love and symbol of the imagination’s horizon of goodness. Eliot is, after all, remembered for maintaining the “essence of Christian self-sacrifice through the apotheosis of human feeling” (Gilbert and Gubar 468). And, like Comte and Feuerbach, Eliot believed that women enacted the most supernal forms of self-sacrificing love with more agility and sublimity than men.

Eliot’s only novel set outside nineteenth-century England, Romola takes place in quattrocento Florence. Many Victorian critics panned the novel because Eliot’s research in the Florentine archive drowns the narrative. Some contemporary critics also suggest that Eliot should have stayed with her tried-and-true method of concentrating on nineteenth-century England and its domestic life rather than focusing on the politics and philosophies of fifteenth-century Florence. Nevertheless, recent scholarship shows that the setting is crucial to the novel’s meaning. Karen Chase and Felicia Bonaparte contend that Romola’s mise-en-scene allows Eliot to depict the powerful struggles between Christian and classical thought in Western civilization. Bonaparte argues that Tessa and Romola are the pagan fertility goddess and Virgin, respectively, illustrating how Western civilization has been caught between the appeal of joy (the classical motif) and the belief in suffering (the Christian motif) (243, 25). Chase, on the other hand, suggests that Romola marries the West’s two cultural traditions of Christianity and classicism (320).
In some sense, then, as Chad May argues, the “conflation of Romola with the Virgin Mary is only possible because of the specific cultural conditions of fifteenth-century Italy” (May 19). In fact, the quattrocento setting allows the author to pass off a startling donné to the Victorian audience: the moral center of the novel is a woman who, reared as a classicist and an atheist, is not a believer in Christianity. Romola’s pagan father raised his daughter to reject Christianity and, instead, to base her actions on “cultivated reason” (*Romola* 154). Indeed, Romola was allowed to be her father’s amanuensis only because the son, Dino, had blasphemed his father’s belief system when he became a Catholic monk. After meeting Savanarola, Romola comes to feel there “is some truth” in Christianity and in her brother Dino’s visions, but she never fully commits to Christian dogma (178). Thus Romola does not truly convert to Christianity although she pays tribute to its sign system, including reverence for the crucifix and the Madonna. As Julian Corner suggests, Romola is fragmented by her immersion in pagan classicism and Savonarola’s Christianity, never finding wholeness in either (Corner 71). Quite rightly, too, J. B. Bullen and Maria LaMonaca argue that despite the heavy-handed references to Romola as the Madonna, this motif must be seen as Eliot’s secularized answer to a world without God (Bullen 434; LaMonaca 171–72).

If Eliot, then, was determined to “preserve the essence of Christian self-sacrifice through the apotheosis of human feeling,” I suggest that in *Romola* she argues that the private arena of affections must find its context and meaning in a political republic founded on sacred altruism, a vision very much reminiscent of Sharples’s religion of humanity (Gilbert and Gubar 468). In other words, Eliot chooses quattrocento Florence as the setting because it allows Romola more access to power than Dorothea of *Middle-march*, who has few options as a Victorian woman. The unique combination of fierce republicanism, Catholic worship of the Madonna, and Renaissance fervor for the scholarly and mystical achievements of the pagans gives a much higher horizon of opportunity in which Romola may attain political, intellectual, and spiritual autonomy and power.

Scholarship on this novel has not focused on how the interconnections of republicanism, Madonna worship, and research on pagan antiquities and philosophies create a complex synthesis with which Romola achieves spiritual independence and political and intellectual self-rule. First, I would suggest that the setting allows Eliot to allude to the scholars who ecstasically responded to the trove of newly discovered, ancient, and often obscure philosophical texts that became available in the West during the Renaissance. As the narrator of *Romola* points out, the members of the Academy in Flor-
ence felt an urgency to divine the meaning of these texts that were replete with philosophical mysteries about the gods. *Romola* refers to the Platonism of Marsilio Ficino and the “heterodox theses” of Pico della Mirandola, illustrating that Eliot had read these philosophers’ attempts to unify the wisdom traditions of the Cabala, Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus, Plato, and Zoroaster as prophetic precursors of Christianity (339).

Ordered by Cosimo de’Medici to learn Greek so that he could translate classical texts, Ficino published his translation of the works of Plato in 1484 an important year in Eliot’s novel. As a Renaissance interpreter, he was certainly not viewed as merely translating the classical texts, but as participating in the sacred hermetic act itself. As Michael J. B. Allen points out, Ficino boldly endeavored to fuse Christian theology with Platonism, and, in doing so, he “revived and refined the ancient notion of a secret, esoteric” tradition referred to as a “prisca theologica” that had ostensibly “prepared for Christianity” (xvi). Remember that Florence Nightingale, a cousin of Eliot’s close friend Barbara Bodichon, was much enamored of Hermes Trismegistus and the idea that mortal life is a time to seek and obtain ultimate knowledge as one evolves toward godhood. In keeping with a secret wisdom tradition, Eliot includes a reference to “Shekinah” in one of the sermons by Savonarola. The Penguin edition of the novel defines this Hebrew term as the “visible manifestation of God” (611n1). Only to be found in the Holy of Holies, the Shekinah was a Judeo-Christian equivalent to the Veil of Isis or the Platonic *nous*, which few adherents were ever blessed with deciphering, let alone seeing.

Feminist scholars have taken issue with Romola being depicted as a translator. The landmark *Madwoman in the Attic* links the character Romola with Eliot’s view of herself as an editor who merely translated works by men like Strauss, Comte, and Feuerbach (Gilbert and Gubar 450). Margaret Homans asserts that the heroine “submissively bear[s] the word of women’s exclusion from and silencing within literature, which is the same as her being reduced to mere body or to the literal with respect to language” (201). However, in response to concerns about Romola’s submissiveness, Homans admits that regardless of how we read the character Romola as a translator, Eliot herself seemed to kick against the pricks of literal translation (178–79). Remarking that the German language and Feuerbach could be “very long-winded,” with one sentence being “a page and a half long!” Eliot hoped that her editing of *The Essence of Christianity* contributed to “the perfecting of a mental product” (*GEL* 2:147, 141). In this statement, Eliot, who is a master of subtle intimations, hints that she actually refines Feuerbach’s stolid, unprocessed prose. Indeed, she comments, “With the ideas of Feuerbach I
everywhere agree, but of course I should, of myself, alter the phraseology considerably” (153). Eliot understood that “phraseology” was not just the outer shell of ideas but organically part of a text’s meaning. Thus, when she asks the rhetorical question, would it be appropriate to “weave” some of Feuerbach’s sentences together to provide more stylistic panache and coherence? Eliot participates in the creation of meaning (147).

I suggest that in writing Romola, like Ficino, Eliot came to see herself as an interpretive seer of a wisdom tradition rather than as just a translator of works by men. Eliot’s response to Richard Holman Hutton’s review of Romola is illuminating. She wrote, “It is the habit of my imagination to strive after as full a vision of the medium in which a character moves as of the character itself” (GEL 4:97). Perhaps, too, she saw doing in-depth research for this novel as part of the visionary process of knowing another age and, like God, creating ex nihilo an authentic world and characters. Eliot’s response to Hutton includes a statement that “great, great facts have struggled to find a voice through me, and have only been able to speak brokenly” (97). Here again, although she belabors her humility, as most women writers did in the Victorian period, Eliot sees herself as a prophet bringing truth to humanity. Based on the narrator’s statement that Romola “had a constitutional disgust for the shallow excitability of women like Camilla, whose faculties seemed all wrought up into fantasies, leaving nothing for emotion and thought,” Homans argues that Eliot loathes Camilla because she fashions herself as a prophetess (Romola 441; Homans 194). I would argue, however, that it is not the idea of women prophesying to which Eliot is averse. Rather, she takes issue with females of “shallow excitability” (“silly women”) becoming prophetesses, for they doom women in general to never being taken seriously as prophets or savants.

In terms of the connection between republicanism and Christianity, scholars have noted that Florence was the first city in the West to experiment with and achieve a concentrated form of republican government, and so in choosing this milieu, Eliot consciously correlates fifteenth-century Florentine republicanism with the French Revolution and the reform movements leading to democracy occurring during the Victorian period (Wihl 248, 249). Suggesting that millenarians and many evangelicals interpreted the spectacular events of the French Revolution and the 1848 revolutions as fulfilling the signs of the coming millennium, Mary Wilson Carpenter argues that Romola subliminally reiterates these millenarian prophecies (Carpenter, George Eliot 3, 61). Romola, of course, features the charismatic reformer Girolamo Savonarola who receives apocalyptic revelations from God, who enjoins him to establish a true republic based on spiritual ide-
alism. In response, Fra Girolamo “insisted on the duty of Christian men not . . . to spend their wealth in outward pomp even in the churches, when their fellow-citizens were suffering from want and sickness” (Romola 8).

Broadly millenarian in its aims, Romola seems to be Eliot’s depiction of the conditions necessary for Utopia, for the new form of sanctified secular life Eliot depicts is always organically inherent in the defiant republicanism of the “sacred rebel,” Savonarola (523). I would argue, then, that for all the criticism of Romola’s political back-story, Eliot repeatedly explains that the political context for the heroine’s individual narrative is absolutely linked to her altruistic obligations. As the narrator asserts, the “fortunes of Tito and Romola were dependent on certain grand political and social conditions which made an epoch in the history of Italy,” a time when “the Republic had recovered the use of its will again” (207, 208). Significantly, the text’s credo is that “life cannot rise into religion” unless the self’s feelings harmonize with the aspirations of a “grand and remote end” (500, 499). The narrative makes clear, too, that in order to achieve the “perfecting of the Christian life,” it is absolutely necessary to establish “a good government” (485).

Republicanism is central to the novel, which begins with the citizens buzzing about the possibility of “real reform,” “a new order of things,” and the “desire for government on a broader basis” (23, 75, 86). In contrast to other readings of Romola’s submission to Savonarola, I argue that the frate teaches Romola that her surrender to domestic duties has been parochial and narrow-minded. Instead, he requires her to enter the public sphere and seek “[c]hanges in the form of the State” so as to help establish a “popular government, in which every man is to strive only for the general good” (249, 343). Thus, when Madonna Romola flees her husband the first time, Fra Girolamo does not call her back to obey Tito, although that can be read as the surface intent. More important, Savonarola tells Romola that “a Florentine woman, should live for Florence” because the “servants of God are struggling after a law of justice, peace, and charity, that the hundred thousand citizens among whom you were born may be governed righteously” (357).

This wider view of Romola’s duties makes her feel that she is being beckoned to “something unspeakably great,” that as a Florentine citizen she should succor the poor whom she has rather brazenly ignored up to this point in her materially comfortable married life (361, 363). Ultimately, Romola believes in a “heroism struggling for sublime ends” and knows that “good government is needful to the perfecting of Christian life.” Hence, she realizes that the sacred cause Savonarola gives her includes “guard[ing] the Republic” from Tito’s “treachery” (439, 485, 406). Hence, when Romola
Chapter 6

realizes that rebellion is as sacred as obedience, the revolt she enacts is in support of the republic and against the marriage tie (468).

In terms of goddess imagery, though it is de rigueur to point up the connection between Romola and the Virgin (LaMonaca 162–63, 171–89), the novel also compares the heroine to the goddesses Minerva, Aurora, and Ariadne. Gilbert and Gubar observe that Eliot’s interest in the Virgin Mother and Saint Theresa should be viewed as the author’s desire to construct a “symbol of uniquely female divinity” (468). Although this comment supports my approach, even more compelling is their argument that the connection Eliot makes between Romola and Ariadne ultimately fails because, as the representation of the “vagrant propensity of the female mind,” Romola resists escape from the labyrinthine gender constructs she inhabits (53–54). Certainly the myth of Ariadne acts as a symbol in this text, but I interpret it as part of a more complex feminist statement by a female writer who did not really like women very much and who was herself drawn to the notion of being, like the Madonna, a woman unlike any other.

I suggest that in secularizing the Christian Madonna and sacralizing the pagan Ariadne, Eliot gave women an avenue to independence while also modeling a credo that withstands the onslaught of skepticism and selfishness figured in Romola and felt in Victorian England.7 I focus, then, on how Eliot combined the qualities of paganism (Ariadne) and Christian morality (the Virgin Mary) as an ideal mode for facing modern skepticism and guiding personal and political reforms. This approach is similar to Sharples’s view of the Virgin and Isis as the same symbolic goddess in different cultural venues, whom nineteenth-century woman should model in their pursuit of intellectual knowledge and republican utopia.

Tito, of course, compares Romola to Ariadne when he commissions Piero di’ Cosimo to design a triptych for his fiancée as a wedding present featuring Tito as Bacchus crowning his Ariadne, Romola (185–87, 200, 327). In choosing this design, Tito does not attach importance to the wisdom of the goddess Ariadne. He is intent on the more commonplace depiction of his beloved as a sublunary goddess based on her beauty and sexual attraction. Melema is not attracted to the idea that Romola might be a seer like Ariadne (or her counterpart, Arachne) who gives Theseus a ball of thread so that he can escape the Minotaur’s labyrinth. Ariadne’s very name offers the potential for spinning meaning out of oneself, but Tito has no interest in how this myth associates Ariadne with navigating the hermeneutic process itself. Rather, his design for the triptych focuses on his love domesticating Romola as his household goddess.
While imagery of the Virgin highlights Romola’s unselfish character, the novel’s plot and theoretical underpinnings depend as much on the motif of Ariadne as weaver and interpreter. Indeed, Ariadne is essential to constructing an answer to the novel’s bleak world-view because she represents the philosophical play necessary to imagine revolutionary reform. The novel begins by tasking the reader with the labyrinthine interpretive process, perhaps associated with Ficino’s pursuit of the ancient mysteries that conceal and reveal god but also related to the mythical Cretan labyrinth associated with Ariadne. Immediately challenging the reader’s hermeneutic abilities, the “Proem” introduces a Florentine student who “had been questioning the stars or the sages, or his own soul, for that hidden knowledge which would break through the barrier of man’s brief life and show its dark path, that seemed to bend no whither, to be an arc in an immeasurable circle of light and glory” (3). Not finding the key to all mysteries, the student can only hope to obtain the knowledge that would assuage a life that seems to “bend no whither.” The text, then, enjoins the reader to question her very soul but does not provide the “arc” to do so successfully. In fact, just a few pages later, the narrator describes Florence as being heir to a “strange web of belief and unbelief” that includes “strange prophecies” and “fetishistic dread,” thus leaving the reader in a “web of inconsistencies” (3, 8, 558).

In the seemingly minor scene in the marketplace that follows the Proem, Florentine traders and shoppers argue with a character named Goro who claims to have seen in the sky a “‘big bull with fiery horns coming down on the church to crush it’” (19). There is neighborly chaffing about whether Goro actually saw such a heavenly sign and, if so, what it means. This conversation leads to apprehensive banter about the meaning of the recent death of Lorenzo de’Medici, the autocratic ruler of the city. As the conversation continues fast and furiously, the narrator pictures Bratti, a quiet member of the crowd, as “mentally piecing together the flying fragments of information,” signifying the difficulty not only of obtaining the facts but of deciphering their import as well (20). Finally, an unnamed member of the crowd asserts that whether a sign be a “‘revelation,’” a “‘portent,’” or merely “‘the written word,’” it always carries indeterminate shadings, and only the “‘illuminated’” can reveal the significance of said sign (22). At this point, the barber Nello wryly points out that even though Savonarola and Fra Menico are holy interpreters of signs, neither of them agrees with the other (22). Hence, this first scene indicates that from the hoi polloi to the elite, the quotidian banter of the crowd to the sacred portents of the frati, no one in Florence is capable of interpreting the simplest of signs. Likewise,
the reader learns that she, too, must make her way through a labyrinth in this insistently complex text.

The epistemological maze is highlighted further when the heroine steps on the stage. Immediately, Romola misjudges the character of her new acquaintance and admirer Tito. In fact, the narrator reveals the almost solipsistic nature of relationships, for Romola's understanding of Melema is merely a “vision woven from within” (70). Even Dino’s vision that so sensationally acts as a turning point for Romola is “woven” from the “threads” of his beliefs (324). Likewise, when Tito becomes entangled with Tessa, it is as though he has “spun a web about himself and Tessa” that cannot be broken (301). Similarly, when Romola becomes aware of Tito’s true character, not only does she feel as though caught in a “tangled web”; she is also aware that no “radiant angel” will give her guidance (325). Thus, when the heroine contemplates fleeing Florence a second time, she feels “confusion,” for “all effort” seemed a “mere dragging at tangled threads” (499). Even Savonarola reaches a point when his mendacity is “entwined” with all that is good in him, just as his self-justification is “inwoven” with dedication to noble ends (520). Unknotting vision from buffoonery, self-aggrandizement from self-renunciation, meaningful signs from insignificant solipsistic symbols is all but impossible in this text. Yet it still demands a disciplined, charitable response to the world.

The Ariadne motif points the reader toward the difficulty of interpretation and the desire to attach meaning to signs. The fictional Bardo is akin to Mirandola and Ficino, who obsessively seeks to find the text that is the original key to all mysteries. Romola comes by her role as weaver of meaning (Ariadne) partially through her father. Bardo asserts that through his scholarship he intended to “‘gather, as into a firm web, all the threads that my research had laboriously disentangled,’” something the female mind, he argues, is incapable of doing (53). But if in plotting and theme Romola is about “philosophic uncertainty,” this condition is particularly harrowing for the female protagonist who is constructed as the symbol (Ariadne) but not as the subject of interpretive strategies (Robinson 31). This conundrum is as important as the one Homans poses about Romola and Western aesthetics, that is, that women are traditionally seen as symbolic bearers but not creators of the word (Homans). If existential despair and feminist angst are at the heart of Romola, Eliot’s novel contends with the view of woman as object of hermeneutic crisis.

Regardless of her father’s assertion that women cannot navigate meaning, more than the pseudo-scholar Bardo, more than the ethicists Savonarola and Dino, and more than the casuist Tito, Romola signifies the psychic,
intellectual aptitude to weave meaning and escape webs of despair. Thus, as with Sharples's vision, Romola becomes a Madonna typified by her wisdom as well as her self-sacrificing love. By the end of the novel, Romola is superior to Savonarola and other male philosophers when she becomes the Visible Madonna and the uncrowned Ariadne, that is, when she rejects the need for masculine approval. At the end of the novel, literally weaving her own meaning, Romola consciously decides to wear the “disguise” or clothing of a nun when she leaves Tito a second time. “Why,” the free indirect discourse asks, “should she care about wearing one badge more than another, or about being called by her own name?” (498) Although Homans asserts that the nun’s habit signifies Romola’s self-renunciation, I argue that at this point, like Teufelsdrockh, the heroine symbolically weaves her own raiment, identity (“name”), and meaning as she prepares to defy other cultural authorities (Homans 206). To Romola the hermeneutics of naming leads to the existential query, “What force was there to create for her that supremely hallowed motive” for doing one’s “duty” to one’s society? She concludes that “some form of believing love” gives one the authority to pierce the hermeneutic chaos and design strategies for taking meaningful, ethical action in the world (498).

But because the “bonds of all strong affection” are “snapped” when she leaves Tito, Romola feels she is in a cul-de-sac of signification, and she wishes to die (498). Whether Eliot means that Romola considers suicide at the climax of her existential distress, the author prophetically claims in 1863, “Drifting away and the Village with the Plague belonged to my earliest vision of the story and were by deliberate forecast adopted as romantic and symbolical elements” (GEL 4:104). As Romola drifts out to sea, she, who has experienced “memories of a dead mother” before “was touching the hands of the beloved dead beside her” and psychically returns to the womb. In this scene, even the verb tense changes from the simple past tense to past progressive, thus mimicking the mystical timelessness of epiphany (62, 502). A number of critics argue that in this scene Romola overcomes her (and Eliot’s) mother-want. As Corner suggests, Romola must re-experience her mother’s death in order to survive because the heroine’s inability to fully embrace a creed is due to the early loss of her mother, making it impossible to transition to other objects as sources of meaning (71–73). Pam Morris argues that Eliot’s ethics are tied to material specificities. That is, the Madonna figure is the one material entity that unites all human beings because their own natal experience creates a psychic, material attachment to the physical act of birthing and maternal love (190). This “archaic memory of maternal love” becomes a veiled but “imaginative symbolization” that socializes citizens to
feel duty toward the community as a whole, says Morris (190, 191; see also Carpenter “Trouble” and Simpson “Mapping Romola”).

Morris’s argument links the political back to the domestic, and I would suggest that this approach aligns with Eliot’s belief that if human suffering transforms the maternal into a site of love equal to the divine, it also makes the symbolic maternal a means to hermeneutic vision and sacred political rebellion. Indeed, in the chapter on drifting, when Romola imagines her death and summons the significance of her life up until that point, she rebirths herself into a future of sacred rebellion as the secular Madonna and goddess of hermeneutics. This combination of two forms of the symbolic feminine divine—the wise and the loving—finally gives her authority in the public and private spheres.

Romola illustrates that authority publicly when her drifting takes her to a small village infected with the plague. A frightened priest, who should be a visionary leader to the villagers, has hidden in the church to escape his duty to his flock and to the immigrant Jewish families who were the carriers of the plague. Romola finds water for one of the plague victims and saves a little boy, whose family has died, thus beginning the task of reweaving a social and political community that has unraveled. She finds the priest and calmly tells him, “I am come over the sea to help those who are left alive—and you, too, will help them now” (554). She adds, with “encouraging authority,” that no longer will he fear his duties as pastor and citizen (554). The new, quietly masterful human goddess does not leave the shattered town until she has guided the priest to return to his role as spiritual leader and resettled the community, leaving for Florence only after the villagers sow their crops and set up a system for obtaining water from the well, which are classic indications of the establishment of civilization (554–55).

The narrative that follows illustrates the centrality of hermeneutics in Romola’s new life. The chapters that immediately precede the “Epilogue” depict a web of inconclusiveness that must be confronted. In these penultimate chapters, Romola deconstructs Savonarola’s self-aggrandizement and annihilation, discrediting his egotism and demystifying his sublime, prophetic signage. Hence Romola must make sense of the (self)destruction of the man who first gave her a belief in something spiritually and politically larger than herself. The description of his downfall is devastating: Savonarola’s desire for public acclaim, “want of constancy,” and “retraction of prophetic claims” “warp” the “strictness of his veracity.” But there is another layer of deceit, the “transpositions and additions” of a devious notary who transcribes the Frate’s confession, further warping Fra Girolamo’s already counterfeit words (565, 566, 567). The pressure on representation itself
The reader must accept that the superlative, inspiring force for good up to this point in the novel, Savonarola, is a “mixture” of “falsity” and “special inspiration,” a man whose “doubleness” and “twofold retractation” leave the making of meaning and sacred political revolution almost impossible (568, 569, 573).

The epilogue, then, must make sense of this linguistic doubleness and respond with a doubleness of its own. The ending has received extraordinary scrutiny from feminist critics, who make convincing arguments that Romola is male-identified (she is), and passively submissive (yes and no) to patriarchy (yes and no). I have been arguing that Romola achieves a kind of protofeminist stature, even though many feminist scholars have taken issue with Eliot’s commitment to women’s rights. Eliot was no feminist partisan in her remark in 1853 that suffrage “only makes creeping progress” and that this was probably best because “woman does not yet deserve a much better lot than man gives her” (GEL 2:86). But this statement also registers the same disgust Sharples and Wright felt about society’s aim to keep women ignorant. As Eliot sardonically explains about ignorant women in her essay on Wollstonecraft and Fuller, “your unreasoning animal is the most unmanageable of creatures.” She concludes that there are two possibilities for dealing with stupid women: “the old plan of corporal discipline” or a “thorough education of women which will make them rational beings in the highest sense of the word” (“Fuller and Wollstonecraft” 989). Eliot may have not cared much for her sex, but one cannot imagine her supporting the first option.

Critiquing Romola’s ending, Homans argues that in the final scene, Eliot privileges a patriarchal writer (Petrarch) whom Bardo earlier in the narrative had used to rationalize the subordination of women. According to this interpretation, Romola is still the “transmitter” who ensures the “textual transmission from one generation of men to the next” that she was at the beginning of the tale (Homans 197). Lesa Scholl remarks, too, that the ending indicates that Romola has always been, and always will be, immersed in masculine ideologies, including those of Savonarola, Tito, and Bardo (17). Gilbert and Gubar comment, “Wearing the mantle of invisibility conferred by her omniscience and the veil of the Madonna conferred by her message of feminine renunciation, Eliot survives in a male-dominated society by defining herself as the Other” (476). This approach highlights Eliot as Romola’s slyer alter ego, suggesting that “renunciation” is a savvy disguise for her inordinate self-regard. But in the most damning evaluation, Shola Elizabeth Simpson confronts the fact that when Romola teaches Lillo, she...
“perpetuat[es]” a “system in which boys learn while girls do not” (Simpson 64).

Although these are astute readings of Romola’s conclusion, I am more in agreement with Alison Booth’s incisive observation that Romola has an astonishing amount of freedom when compared to most Victorian women. As “an aristocrat with a complete classical education,” Romola obtains a “vocation of public service, travels unchaperoned, and becomes feme [sic] sole under law.” In a novel with an open-ended closing, the epilogue, in which Eliot appears to prop up patriarchy, actually interrupts it, argues Booth. Indeed, Romola is conveniently gifted with the killing off of her real and symbolic fathers (112, 116, 117). Teaching Tito’s son to give up his individual desires for happiness, Romola performs her “duty of rebellion” against gendered narratives she has been trained to fulfill (127). A rebel in disguise, Romola, as Booth perceptively points out, is much like Eliot’s activist friend Barbara Bodichon and the independent Florence Nightingale. Finally, Booth notes that Eliot’s depiction of Romola as a self-sacrificing Madonna is so brilliant that the Victorian audience never noticed the radical implications of the final image of an all-female group (118–19).

I would add, as well, that making sense of the “warped” “veracity” that precedes the ending, the epilogue doubles the powers of the self-made symbolic goddess and woman who has become Ariadne–Madonna. Consider Ninna, the so-called neglected girl in Romola’s household. At the beginning of the epilogue, this prepubescent child is depicted as having “wisdom” as she “instruct[s]” her mother in the art of “weaving” flowers (576, 577). Amidst the ineffectual Tessa and Monna Brigida, representations of an earlier generation of silly women who would appear to be dying off, Ninna seems to symbolize a new cohort of girls, who, like Ariadne, will weave meaning in themselves and their work. Ninna would also seem to be a temporal rendition or earthly precursor, on the order of John the Baptist, to the sublime weaving of the priestess/goddess Romola, who is also engaged in the role of teaching. In a trance in which she weaves an invisible vision of meaning as she gazes intently into space, Romola makes her pupil Lillo wait upon her. Unlike his sister Ninna, Lillo (the future of masculinity in this society of women) appears to have greater access to reading than Ninna, but he has no interest in it. Instead, quite the reverse of the active, self-confident, independent Ninna, like a puppet—and like his dense mother, Tessa,—he passively waits for Romola to come out of her trance and reveal to him the meaning of his life.

Why does the narrator not afford Ninna the same attention? In a letter to John Blackwood dated 9 November 1867, Eliot blithely commented:
“I have been of late quite astonished by the strengthening testimonies that have happened to come to me, of people who care about every one of my books and continue to read them—especially young men, who are just the class I care most to influence” (GEL 4:397). In addition, in her journal on 9 March 1880, Edith Simcox noted that Eliot confessed that she was much more influenced by men than by women. Simcox transcribed Eliot’s admission that “she had never all her life cared very much for women.” Although she cared very much for the “womanly ideal, sympathized with women and liked for them to come to her in their troubles,” she admitted that the “friendship and intimacy of men was more to her” (9 March 1880, Simcox Autobiography; qtd. in GEL 9:299). Simcox also described an awkward conversation between herself, Eliot, and Lewes in which Eliot and Simcox end up debating who is more generous to them personally, men or women. In Simcox’s account, Eliot accuses Simcox of viewing men negatively. While Simcox admits that she feels women always treat her with more kindness, Eliot remarks that she feels cold-shouldered by them and is much more comfortable with men (9 November 1877, Simcox Autobiography; qtd. in GEL 9:199–200).

An ungenerous interpretation of Romola’s apparent partiality toward Lillo might conclude that the novelist did not achieve the progressive thinking that she disdained silly women for opposing, perhaps because, disabled by patriarchal institutions Eliot tried so hard to deconstruct, too often she was still amenable only to excruciatingly gradual changes on behalf of women. In addition, for all Eliot’s allegiance to feminine self-renunciation, one often senses that the lady doth protest too much, thus highlighting debased humility that, on a continuum, is ultimately closely connected with arrogance. It should be remembered that the novel ends depicting Romola as, like the Madonna, a woman physically and psychically alone among her sex. As Julia Kristeva astutely remarks in “Stabat Mater,” the male-defined Virgin Mary is unique among women and mothers and, as such, is an “inaccessible goal” for all women (327). One might suspect that Eliot, who allowed herself to be called “Madonna,” probably enjoyed viewing herself as like Mary or Romola who is “not like the herd of thy sex” (Romola 130). It must be admitted that in the room where we last see Romola and her followers, they all occupy the same space, but Romola is physically separated from Ninna and the lesser devotees Tessa and Monna Brigida. Romola appears most comfortable with Lillo, but only because by teaching him she is able to pursue (and disguise) her primary goal, the quest for knowledge and wisdom.

Interpreting Eliot’s motives for focusing on Lillo more generously, we might surmise that any feminist would find it tedious and ineffectual to train
the feminine automatons Tessa and Monna Brigida, whose behaviors would hopefully die out with them. And possibly the self-assured, remote, wisely weaving Ninna is, like Sharples and more so than Eliot, psychically establishing herself as an independent woman. There is nothing as well to suggest that Romola has not spent time teaching Ninna, for Romola is the hierophant to the whole group. Indeed, Ninna’s weaving and wisdom suggest that she has already learned from her mentor, and Ninna appears to be naturally more intellectually capable than her dull-witted brother. Likewise, to picture Ninna as “wise” does upend the patriarchal norm that was depicted in Savonarola’s mentorship of Romola. Perhaps, given Ninna’s self-containment and pursuit of Ariadne as model, Romola does not need to instruct her in the same way that Lillo needs to be trained to be a “‘great man’” who has “‘wide thoughts, and much feeling for the rest of the world as ourselves,’” and who must try to “‘raise men to the highest deeds they are capable of’” (578). It is possible, then, that Romola is attentive to Lillo because men as well as women must change in order to establish an equal society. The crawl toward women’s rights would not reach its conclusion unless men were included in the project. Feminists, after all, must train both sexes, and each must find the rhetoric and audience they are most skilled at using and influencing.

Eliot knew of what she spoke when it came to changing men’s attitudes about women. This study has pointed out the fear that masculinist institutions had about female empowerment as embodied in feminist goddess symbols. Some reviews of Romola show just how much the male population needed to be educated. Taking advantage of the debates about the Woman Question and making light of what could in our century be called the “chick novel,” the Saturday Review complained that the tiresome Romola was “too much of a goddess to make it fair play for such a weak mortal as Tito to have to love her” (“Romola” 125). In a similar vein, a curious review titled “Epigrams on ‘Romola’” carped, “Women must love their sex’s type to see / Embodied in such goddess-majesty; / But surely man can hardly relish so / In lapdog prettiness to sit below!” Other epigrams step up the noxious tone. For example, “Women invented lies: yet, here [in Romolo], forsooth, / The wife impugns the husband’s want of truth.” The last stanza is viscerally binary in its logic: “‘Man is a meaner animal than woman, / With whom her higher self has nought in common.’ / Such is the moral of your book, George Eliot / And it’s high time that somebody should tell ye’t (“Epigrams” 1871:32). But the heart of the epigrams gets at the false binary patriarchy constructs. Noting that Romola is “for women, not for men,” the versifier plays his trump card, asserting that although “The thrice three [female]
Muses form a glorious ring,” in the “centre sits Apollo—king!” (“Epigrams” 32)

This versifier did not have to say that in Victorian culture the male holds political power, and it is high time George Eliot, the female writer, figured that out. Just the fact that he felt the need to bring the male God forward to undercut the female muse (Eliot) suggests that Eliot had touched a patriarchal nerve with her depiction of woman as goddess. The Westminster Review was more sophisticated and less generous in its patronizing attitude toward Eliot. The review contends that “this long and elaborate disquisition on the relations between the sexes” is anachronistic in that it brings Victorian views on gender to a story about fifteenth-century Italy (“ROMOLA” 348). Grumbling that the novel is a badly disguised modern tale, the review points out to the female writer that concern about the relations between the sexes was not on the minds of quattrocento women and that those relations were not a universal (read: women’s history is not of universal import) (348). It is with such stuff that Eliot contends in her sometimes belabored and unsatisfying efforts to imagine a symbolic goddess who would model charity to men, the pursuit of progressive politics, and the achievement of a higher hermeneutic potentiality for women.

In The Religion of the New Age (1850), Georg Friedrich Daumer proposed that women be worshipped as divine entities. Marx derided the author for not dealing with women’s devastating material conditions (Marx and Engels, On Religion 94–96). Similarly, Kristeva calls for a “herethics” that obviates the need for goddesses (“Stabat Mater” 330). As Kelly Oliver, editor of The Portable Kristeva, notes of Kristeva’s argument, the cult of the Madonna must be deconstructed because it does not allow real mothers to articulate the actual experience of maternity (297). However, Kristeva’s herethics is complicated, allowing contradictions about the goddess to be simultaneously legitimate. She suggests that behind the Mariolotry, “one might also detect an ambivalent conspiracy, through excessive spiritualization, of the mother-goddess and the underlying matriarchy with which Greek culture and Jewish monotheism kept struggling” (“Stabat Mater” 310). Thus, while Kristeva seeks to move beyond the psychological “want” that produces the need for a goddess, she recognizes that the culture’s overdetermined response to the Madonna indicates that the goddesses which ancient Greek and Jewish culture tried to stamp out have their symbolic revenge in the masked Virgin.

Concluding this study, I suggest that in Romola, Eliot performs her own ambivalent “herethics” by using the Madonna as a cover for Ariadne. Thus
she is able to refer positively to the rebellious traces of the ancient goddess
tradition that the masculinist thinkers Bardo, Dino, and Savonarola would
deplore. Less disruptive than Brontë’s titanic Eve, Eliot’s Great Goddess is
not omniscient or omnipotent, although one imagines that an omnipotent,
masculine God is not really the kind of deity Eliot would be interested in
honoring. Eliot deemed women’s capacity for sublime—and unlimited—
feeling for others as more godlike than the masculine divine traits of omni-
science or omnipotence, which are rather cold, arrogant attributes after all.
When Romola subliminally desires her own death, the narrator remarks
that the “Great Mother has no milk to still” human pain, perhaps a nod
to Feuerbach’s idea that the gods are inferior to humankind when it comes
to the capacity for suffering (502). In this allusion to the Magna Mater,
Eliot also accepts that feeling and suffering are necessary to deepen human
knowledge, hermeneutic insight, and charity so that humanity can move
from solipsism toward the communal. In Romola, the Great Mother desires
to offer the [breast] milk of kindness, a desire based upon unlimited feeling
and familial unity.

That the narrator refers to the goddess at this moment (she appears and
does not appear) points toward Eliot’s agnosticism and her construction of
the symbolic female divine as what can exist as an ideal for human behavior.
In Romola, Eliot allows that although the “great nature-goddess” of the past
was “not all-knowing,” her “life and power were something deeper and more
primordial than knowledge” (97). Like Brontë, Barrett Browning, Night-
ingale, Jameson, the millenarians and feminist socialists, Eliot imagined a
symbolic goddess who combines classical, pagan, and Christian elements,
as though no one entity were effulgent enough by itself to represent divine
potentiality. In a novel in which no being is omniscient, where the high-
est entity is a mortal woman who combines the hermeneutic powers of
one symbolic divine female and the sacred, political rebellion and charity
of another, Eliot intimates that more profound even than the fiction of an
“all-knowing” God was that of the titanic women who named and generated
the divine, making the human concept of god and hermeneutics possible
through their primordial yearning toward all living beings. As LaMonaca
asserts, “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) attri-
bute” (184–85). Weaving a richly dense narrative, Eliot bears/bares the con-
sequences of unlimited feeling and pulsating yearning to know and interpret
the other, making hers an immaculate conception that rewrites the mystify-
ing Word/word.